



JOYCE DiDONATO

Yankee Diva

photography

BILL PHELPS

interview

CHRISTINA LESSA

Blouse:
Houghton New York



On December 31, 2012, I sat and watched as Joyce DiDonato commanded the well-heeled, sharp-tongued, holiday frenzied crowd of 4000 on the formidable stage of The Metropolitan Opera. Her voice summoning a perfect longing that silenced even the harshest of critics.

It is astonishing to read the endless reviews touting acclaimed mezzo-soprano, Joyce Didonato’s incredible talent. Placido Domingo has proclaimed, “Joyce is one of the greatest opera singers of her generation.” The New Yorker has stated, “[Joyce is] ...perhaps the most potent female singer of her generation”. With a voice ‘nothing less than 24-carat gold’, says The Times. Joyce is a Diva beyond compare, yet her humble demeanor, American small town pragmatism and willingness to nurture future artists present her as something so much more.

Joyce and I met for the first time on a cold December afternoon in Manhattan, at Fiorello’s in the corner booth. It was only a few days before New Years Eve and my opportunity to attend her transcendent performance as Mary Queen of Scots, in Donizetti’s, “Maria Stuarda” at The Metropolitan Opera. As we began our interview we were struck by the similarities in our backgrounds: We were both born the babies in families of seven children with five girls and two boys. We shared many of the lessons that a young sibling of a multi-generational household learns through watching the trials and tribulations of those who came before us. We both attended Catholic School and dealt with all of the inhibitions that that moral code can instill. Our mothers and fathers passed away the same year and with the exact same number of months between them. Even more than any of these meaningful coincidences, though, Joyce and I discovered that we share the same intense commitment to the belief that arts education is a fundamental necessity.

Joyce trumps me on any given day with her herculean efforts. She is a beacon of inspiration and takes the time whenever she can out of her phenomenal global schedule to answer emails from young performers seeking advice, actually paying attention with humility and grace to tweets from strangers such as this one:

Bess Moser @moserbess
Tonight I will be seeing my first performance @MetOpera. Tonight I will be seeing @JoyceDiDonato onstage for the first time.
#bestillmyheart

Because of the @mention, the singer saw it and tweeted back

Joyce DiDonato @JoyceDiDonato
Tonight I will be singing live for @moserbess for the first time!

Joyce also publishes a continually updated blog called “Yankee Diva” to share her experiences and insights into the metaphysical world of performing arts and it’s history. It is remarkable to navigate the web and discover how far reaching her

influence is as a mentor. She has posted Vlog entries to answer questions presented to her by aspiring young singers. “Should I dye my hair” was carefully considered and responded to with a beatiful commentary on, among other pragmatic advice, how concerns with outward appearance should not distract us from living a life that engages in meaningful experiences that will ultimately enrich our performances. It is this type of extraordinary commitment that Joyce brings to each and every performance. She studies the composer’s intent for each of her characters and the technical nuances of every note with the impassioned appetite of a zealous scholar.

CHRISTINA LESSA: What was life like growing up in Prairie Village, Kansas?

JOYCE DIDONATO: I went to Catholic school. I had to attend daily mass through 8th grade. Monthly confessionals were on the calendar for a house of 6 or 7 kids. We got away with a lot though. I was one of the youngest and my parents were so tired of parenting by the time I came around. We were a very musical Catholic family. It was a typical mid-western upbringing. Very white and very contained. The grocery store was up the street and the church was down the street. High school was a ten-minute drive. It was very sheltered. My father was the volunteer church choir director and was an architect by trade. Many generations of siblings provided a household that had classical music coming from my dad’s radio, Barbara Streisand coming from my older sister’s radio, ACDC and Def Leppard coming from my brother’s radio, the great hits from the 80s from my radio, Billy Joel, etc. and my two older sisters playing classical music on the piano. My older siblings were kids of the 70s and my parents were so naïve and sheltered, they didn’t know what was happening, sex and drug wise, and I was watching it from my perspective and I thought I knew what not to be.

My way of fitting into the family and getting attention was as the perfect overachiever. I don’t say that with any bitterness or regret but I think I’ve learned why I’ve ended up where I am.

CHRISTINA LESSA: Yes, I completely understand that dynamic of being on the younger end in a large family. There is something about that whole experience that makes you fearless.

JOYCE DIDONATO: I’m definitely not afraid of hard work. A few years ago I was in London performing in Rossini’s “The Barber of Seville” at the Royal Opera House. I was finishing the famous aria “Una voce poco fa.” when suddenly, I tripped over a metal flap track onstage and fractured my fibula. Although I was in pain, having no idea it was actually broken; there was no way I was going to call the understudy. I hobbled though Act One. Quitting wasn’t an option for me. I just kept thinking, ‘I just sprained it. If I can put ice on it and keep it elevated when I’m offstage, then I’ll get through this OK.’ That was my thinking. It wasn’t at all that

I couldn’t go on. At intermission I decided to go out for Act 2 using a crutch. That night I spent four hours in the emergency room getting fitted for my cast but I just couldn’t let my dream of giving the audience my all go. I finished the entire run with my leg in a cast, singing Rossini’s ingénue from a wheelchair. The audience never let me forget that my effort was appreciated. It was crazy and amazing to receive such support.

The thing I’ve had to learn now is how to ease off the gas in terms of needing to achieve or needing to prove something or needing to have accolades. I’m in a business that’s all about applause. That’s actually less interesting to me now than the process. What’s interesting to me is the mid-western mentality of hard work, but modest has been something that I’ve had to wrestle with. We didn’t grow up with any kind of prejudice against people that weren’t white Catholics, whether blacks or immigrant. There was just no language like that at all, but I realized there was this slight prejudice against people with money in my family. It was very unspoken and very under the radar...wanting to be at the top of your profession was deemed as arrogant, somewhat self centered. But I wanted that, I thought, ‘what’s wrong with wanting to be the best?’ Modest professions run in my family, we have a bricklayer, teachers, my Father was the church choir director. I was expected to find my way in that arena, as a teacher. I was driven to teach, to nurture. It is the most noble of professions and the most necessary, but performing was calling out to me. At that point when I was being pulled by opera, I’d stop and think, ‘I’m in Kansas?’ I really can’t be a performer, I mean that’s crazy.’ When I entered college I was absolutely certain that I would be a music teacher. Despite my love of singing, my desire to teach hadn’t diminished. When I was a student teacher I was assigned to two low-income schools. I saw such an immense need for good teachers. And I was really pulled because that felt like the place I should be.

CHRISTINA LESSA: What was the turning point for you? It is certainly not a craft that takes shape over night...

JOYCE DIDONATO: Toward the end of my time at Wichita State I became interested in opera. It was in part because I got more scholarship money by singing in the opera chorus. Intellectually, musically, emotionally, and physiologically I started really getting seduced by it. At one point my Father made it ok to want something else. He said that there was more than one way to educate people, touch people and make a difference in their lives. I performed in the chorus of Die Fledermaus at WSU. I had the time of my life and it was then that I understood the sense of community that surrounded performing arts but also the level of inexplicable virtuosity that was required. That really got my blood pumping, I still am daunted by it, but the challenge excites me continuously.

As fate would have it, I was accepted into a competitive graduate program at the Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia, and three years later I was lucky enough to be accepted into Houston Grand Opera’s young artist program. I was 26 when I got into the program and my teacher, in my first lesson said, ‘Joyce, you’re musical, you’re talented, you’re obviously intelligent; but there’s no future in the way you’re singing.’” Here I thought I had made the big time, you know, the Houston Opera Studio, one of the top programs in the country and yet I was just old enough and just scared enough, that I think I trusted him. He said, “You’re singing on youth and muscle, and that’s going to last about three years.” and he was right. I wasn’t supporting my singing with proper breathing technique. I would often cross my fingers behind my back going ‘I hope I get the high note.’ I had to start from scratch. I had to let go so that I could begin again.

About three years later I started to get offers to sing in opera houses in Kentucky, Oklahoma and Arizona. I was really content, I thought, ‘I’m going to have a career as a regional singer. This is great.’ It’s more than I could have hoped for.

I did Pavarotti’s competition around 94-95 in Philadelphia, the Academy of Beaux Arts. I was so nervous, so young, a little overweight and unsure of my personal style. I’m standing backstage and I’ve got three or four singers ahead of me and I’m in line waiting... all the singers ahead of me were Asian. Pavarotti would call a person out on stage and he would struggle with their name for a long time in this big thick Italian accent, so when it came to me he goes, “Ah finalmente ah Joyce DiDonato! It was like I was being announced. I wasn’t a great singer yet, and at that time I was kind of a heavy-set girl from Kansas. He says, “la bella sinora DiDonato, what would you like to sing today?” –“DiDonato, you are Italian.” “No actually, I’m married.” –“Ah, your husband then, he’s Italian.” In a deep whispering voice, right into the microphone as if no one else could hear him, he says, “Oh he’s a lucky, lucky, man!” I didn’t win, but it was a fun memory and the start of my interest in a more global career.

Eventually I decided to enter a competition that had been recently started by a well-known tenor: Plácido Domingo’s Operalia.

Just before the competition I did a big audition, which meant a lot to me, and I felt I was close to winning. Then, I found out that the only thing the general director wrote on my evaluation was, “She has not much talent.” Despite that I thought, ‘Well, I’m trying for a different level now, I’ll see what happens.’ I wasn’t quite ready to give up.

Then something amazing happened, I did the Domingo competition. I sang in the final round one aria [Rossini’s “Non più mesta”] and got a call the next day. A man

spoke to me and said, “You don’t know me, but my name is Simon Goldstone, I think you’re going to be a superstar, and I want to manage you worldwide.” It was the first time anybody had said anything remotely that daunting. Simon convinced me to go to Europe. He had set up thirteen auditions in sixteen days. It was exhausting and I got twelve, ‘No’s’ and they were all B and C level houses. I really felt that this was the end. I resigned myself to the idea that I should return home and reconsider my career as a singer.

CHRISTINA LESSA: Then came the legendary audition, I love how this story ends!

JOYCE DIDONATO: Yes! My thirteenth and final audition was at The Paris Opera. (the only A house that I sang for) Two hours later they offered me the role of Rosina in this new production of the Barber of Seville and that was when I was about ready to say, “I guess I should not do this!” That was three years after “not much talent!” I was floored. After that the A level houses all took notice. Everyone wanted to know who this new “Rosina” was and my career shifted overnight. Now I am fortunate enough to experience so much, and continue on a successful path. My thoughts are still anchored in giving back, raising up those who need a voice in arts education and support.

CHRISTINA LESSA: What do you think about the current political climate as far as arts education? How do we re-build creativity as a priority in a country that has lost it’s governmental focus on the arts?

JOYCE DIDONATO: Art as an investment in our future relations with the world and ourselves, that’s the key. So it’s not necessarily to teach the arts as an end to the means of building artists. It’s training the mind to think creatively. Training the mind to think outside the box, which will service the sciences and the arts... I did a fascinating interview with Vivienne Westwood the iconic fashion designer. I had interviewed a bunch of people about what is a drama queen and why is art important and what we get out of it. Vivian has done a lot of thinking about this and her whole premise is about culture being the key to our survival, essentially she feels art should be a human right. She is big into global warming, climate change and is a huge activist about saving the planet. But she said culture teaches us about how we fit into society and the world and if we understand about how we fit into the world we will take care of it. If we understand ourselves better we will be more equipped to solve problems, to create our way out of any situation. Art in education works on several different levels for me. As children we all need an outlet for expression, period. Secondly, if education is only about scoring high on the next test, they are essentially being told that their creativity isn’t important – that our imagination isn’t important. The arts are the key for building a creative mind in kids, but also in adults. Especially important today is the thought that arts can be the key to understanding other

cultures. Why aren’t we talking about arts as an investment? That’s how you shine the light on it. Those who fund the education system need to understand this is important to our future as a people. I do take issue with the idea that maybe we need to reinvent the wheel to “revitalize” opera. I hear from a huge number of young people - it’s actually mind blowing - who are already incredibly passionate and starving for more of this crazy operatic world. What the general public is missing, I believe, is for the operatic community, to reach out to them to fill in the gaps that our education system is now sorely missing. We have been very busy sending out a message that our art form is dying (it’s not, and it’s been proven so), and that we are all old-fashioned and out of date. We’ve been selling that. We’ve been apologizing for how “traditional” or “old fashioned” opera is. I disagree so strongly with this. Now the model is CHANGING, and the sense of culture is rapidly shifting, but opera is indescribably important for society today - we are the singular art form that combines all the others, that deals with life, death, love, lust, jealousy, anger, familial strife, political unrest and turmoil - it’s remarkable how current it is!

Perhaps the missing link, aside from a criminal lack of arts education in the schools, is a consistent production level where, whether traditional or updated, we are performing with real truth and integrity to the score with truly proficient and pure vocalism, exquisite musicianship, and utterly compelling theatricality. No small feat, granted, but I’m sure when audiences recognize this, and the attendance continues to grow with new generations, the new philanthropic attitude toward support will prevail and expand.

CHRISTINA LESSA: I see your passion about arts education and how you understand the gifts of adaptation, acceptance and ingenuity that a creative background can foster. Where do you focus your energies to make a difference?

JOYCE DIDONATO: Music education is at the top of the list for me. It is the KEY to all the issues we are facing now, I do see it as criminal that the arts in schools have been cut down to nothing. We are stealing from our children (our future) and the chance to develop their imaginations, to find their expressive voices, to learn to think outside a prescribed box, or to think, God forbid, independently! This is a crisis of epic proportions and we need to address this.

I also think if we can have a public that is tuned in ‘culturally’ (and by this, yes, I’m referring to the fine arts - not to reality television!) we will have a more informed, compassionate, proactive community. When I interviewed Vivienne Westwood, she spoke of how culture gives people a sense of how they fit into the world - and without this sense, they become desensitized, removed, uninvolved, and this breeds apathy and lethargy. I think she has a very strong point, and so I’m on a soapbox for us to stop apologizing for opera, but instead start shouting its praises.

Coat: Maggie Norris Couture





Dress:
Maggie Norris Couture

Hair: Damian Monzillo @ Bernstein & Andriulli

Makeup: Jenny Kanavaros for Dior Beauty

Stylist: Ashley Pruitt

she’s a huge philanthropist and started a charter school for the arts. It’s fabulous. They built a huge performing arts center in Kansas City, the Kauffman Center. Moshe Safdie is the architect. It’s a symphony hall and an opera house. \$450 million privately raised funds. It opened just last year. Shirley Helzberg stood on the stage at the opening of the event and said, “I know that my name is in this building but I really want you all to call this the DiDonato Hall or the Smita Hall, because this belongs to you, our community.” It changed Kansas City overnight. She’s a very unassuming Midwestern lady who runs an empire and gives back. I would name her and Julia Kauffman because they’ve revolutionized that city.

CHRISTINA LESSA: That is a story of philanthropy at its best! The greatest patrons are equally as important as the highest level creatives. Thankfully it seems that most of the dedicated patrons that I know consider it a lifetime calling. What drives you to continue to achieve at such a high level?

JOYCE DIDONATO: It’s everything. You are never done. It’s the experience of getting inside the character, the story. That can even be in a song recital. It’s so transcendent. I’ll never be finished with Maria Stuarda, not as a character, not as an opera. There is always something more to strive for. What also drives me is the connection I have with the fans that interact with me. I see the significant impact it has on their lives. That helps me strive to be more free and honest on the stage. Because the more free and honest I can be the more quickly or immediately it will connect to them. The more layers I have to go through the more my voice arrives to them diminished. I’m always working on myself, which is part of that idea. These things are masterpieces, things that exist in a sphere that is bigger than any one person. They exist in something that is much bigger. They are talking about beauty, truth and humanity and things that really are what we are all striving to understand. It’s a universe that is just infinite. I’m a curious person with a curious nature. I’m constantly amazed that that’s how I get to spend my day.

On January 26th, 2013 I sat in awe as Joyce performed her final night as Maria Stuarda at The Met. Her critically acclaimed performance assured that there was not a seat to spare. This time the quiet anticipation of a skeptical, yet reserved operatic audience gave way to outbursts of unrestrained cheers for the tyrannized Queen and heckles for those who dared denounce her. The elderly gentleman next to me could not contain his excitement, conducting furiously with one hand throughout each act. Gasps of breathless empathy filled the air as she reached her final fate only to give way to thunderous applause as the curtain fell. It was a performance that I imagine happens perhaps once in a lifetime. Joyce DiDonato had infused her audience with the noble truth of her performance, and the result was history.

I want to stop selling the fact that it’s irrelevant and outdated. Nothing is further from the truth (If we do our jobs fully). And I want all of us to reach out to kids - they are STARVING for music in their lives. It’s our responsibility to start giving back to them in a major way - if we don’t, who will?

CHRISTINA LESSA: The role of the public intellect is very important now. Who do you think the great intellectual creative voices of America are right now?

JOYCE DIDONATO: Sir Ken [Robinson] without question would be at the top of my list. Bill Gates, Steve Jobs was... This whole idea of the foundation that they have built - the Internet - is all about creativity at least in the start. Now, it seems that it’s just about commerce. I think another voice is someone like Matt Damon and the kinds of films that he’s making. He’s drawing attention to fracking. I think that’s interesting in the sense that he’s a mainstream Hollywood guy who’s using his name and role to shine a light on important issues. Ben Affleck goes along the same line. Bono’s not American, but I think the kind of work that he does is also really phenomenal. He’s attacked this whole African health issue in an economic way, shining a light on poverty. It’s distressing. You read the quote on the outside of the Kennedy Center by JFK on the importance of the arts and we don’t have a voice like that and that is making us culturally bankrupt. We don’t have a brave person getting up and saying this really matters. In Kansas City I’ve got Shirley Helzberg who does Helzberg Diamonds,