



Who's Who in  
GIANNI SCHICCHI

# PRODUCTION STYLE

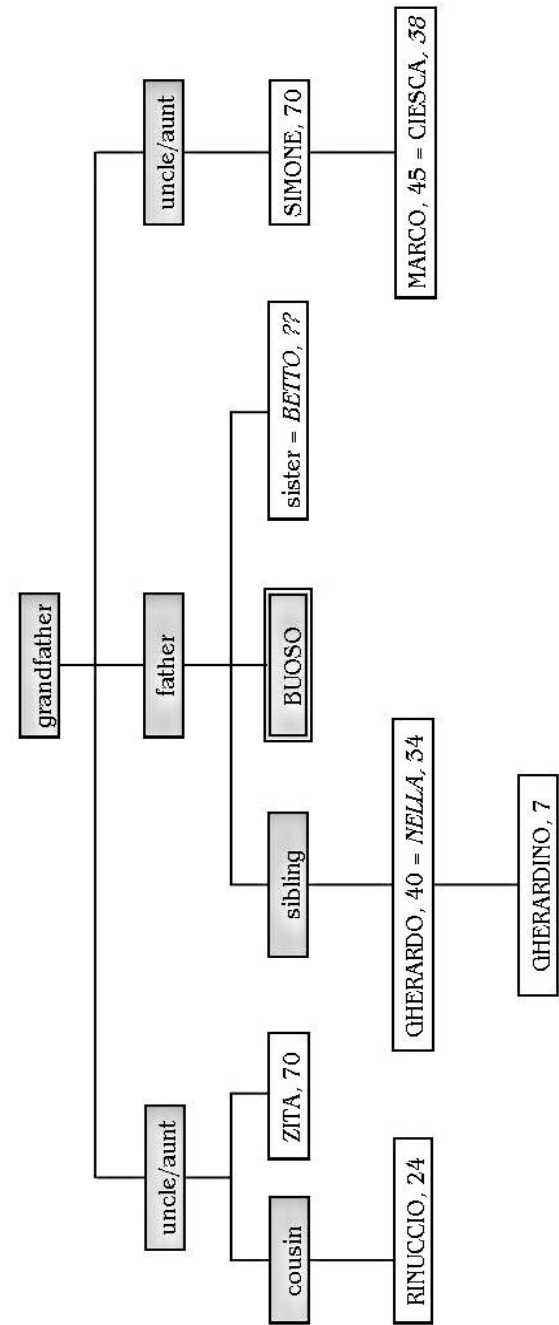
I would like to update this production to the Nineteenth Century, for two reasons, one negative and one positive. The negative reason, which is the lesser of the two, is that the original period, around 1300, has very little reality for us, and the characters in their unusual, multipartite, highly-colored costumes might all too easily seem like caricatures or figures out of a comic strip. Of course there is a caricature element to the characters in this piece, a manic one-sidedness, but I feel it can emerge better by working against an apparent conformity. The opera is about, or partly about, hypocrisy—that is, the credibility gap between appearance and reality—and I would rather work this by having apparently strait-laced people revealing themselves to be grotesque, than by having apparently grotesque people acting strait-laced.

Hence the positive side of my choice. I feel that the Nineteenth Century evokes associations of both elements of the characters' hypocrisy simultaneously. On the one hand, there is the mercantile motive: the compulsive need of the rising middle class to make money, especially for the status it buys. On the other hand, there is a strong emphasis on middle-class order and propriety, with the family as the basic hierarchical unit, held together as much as anything by the common belief—not so much that this is the way Donatis should behave—but that this is the way Donatis should be *seen* to behave!

In this period, the general effect of the costumes will be entirely sober, with the mourning motif present throughout. But there should always be a sense that this is an assumed facade. I am asking that the line of the costumes, and particularly their accessories, be exaggerated to the verge of absurdity, in different ways suitable to each character. Although superficially similar at first appearance, the characters will distinguish themselves in their detail. By this, I do not mean the actual clothes and accessories, but how they use them. Each person has a particular set of tics and mannerisms, pompous or nervous as the case may be; each may be aggressive or self-deprecating, rhetorical or insinuating; each has got into the way of treating their clothing and personal articles in a particular manner which both limits and defines them (and annoys the hell out of everybody else!).

In moving the action to the late Nineteenth Century, however, I shall make no attempt to update the various references in the text. This will still be the Florence of Arnolfo and Giotto, only filtered through a Roland Park living-room. The punishment for perjury will still be amputation of the hand. The properties which the family fight over will still be mules and sawmills, though they will pursue them with the vehemence of financiers angling for mergers and transfers of preferred stock. I do not propose making any attempt to reconcile the two periods whatsoever. I do not want the performers to behave as though they were aware of the discrepancies in any way. I have tried this before, and know that it is not a problem for the audience in practice, provided that it is not a problem for the cast.

The Family Tree  
of  
BUOSO DONATI



traditional *commedia dell'arte* Arlecchino, exemplified in opera most notably by Figaro in *The Barber of Seville*. But the balance required here is an especially difficult one to achieve. For my taste, the traditional portrayal (cf. Tito Gobbi) of SCHICCHI as a red-nosed clown is impossible to take. Fortunately, however, in the nineteenth-century milieu of bourgeois convention and respectability which we are setting up, a very little flamboyance will go a long way. What the Donati's hate about him is that he is an upstart, a *parvenu*, a person of no breeding or sense of decorum. What RINUCCIO admires about him (and the audience should too) is that he has red blood in his veins. He is a go-getter, somebody who would rather build a new city than live in the ruins of the old. So what if he has no taste, if his practice is somewhat sharp, his methods a little crooked? He delights in it, and his delight is infectious. There is really nothing shady about him, since everything is out in the open. His saving qualities are these, and they are the most important of all: he cares for human happiness and love, and he hates hypocrisy.

LAURETTA is GIANNI SCHICCHI's daughter. She is in love with RINUCCIO, and an obvious match for him. The libretto puts her at 21, but I'd like to play her younger, maybe around 17. Despite the questionable tactics which have enabled her wheeler-dealer father to get where he is, she has been brought up with her essential innocence untouched, and comes over as fresh, simple, and utterly delightful, without any artifice. Or without *much* artifice: she certainly knows how to manipulate her father—she has more than a drop of his wily blood in her own veins, although she uses it only when she has to. I assume that her mother died when she was very young, but although her father brought her up alone, he did it well, and with much love. In contrast to the appearance of everybody else in the entire opera, her clothes are pastel in color and simple in cut; she has no reason to be in mourning, and should come in like a breath of the Spring day outside.

## The Other Characters

The other characters in the opera are entirely one-dimensional. The ideas given below are starting-points only. The details (especially of Pinellino and Guccio) can be developed during rehearsal.

DOCTOR SPINELLOCCIO I see as a very aged, doddering old man, utterly ineffective, and half blind with big glasses. He is bent double, almost wasted away in face and body, with an apologetic manner and a wheezy voice. The others think they can push him around, but he is persistent for all that.

AMMANTIO, THE NOTARY, by contrast, is somebody who comes in from the beginning as though he were in charge. Two things vie for dominance with him: on the one hand the majesty of the law, of which he is the authorized representative; on the other, the fact that his work consists in being of service to other people. He is middle-aged and pompous. Much of the time he is unctuously servile, but when anybody infringes on the due process of the law, he becomes obstinate, belligerent, and touchy.

## ABOUT THE CHARACTERS

### The Donati Family

In staging the relatives, I want to remain conscious of the family structure, and particularly of the internecine rivalries between the various sub-groups within the family. I have drawn up a family tree (last page) to make the relationships clearer. Three generations are present. The oldest is that of the dead man, Buoso Donati, comprising his cousins ZITA and SIMONE, and his brother-in-law BETTO, all around 70. The next generation comprises the two married couples of around 40, MARCO and CIESCA, GHERARDO and NELLA. The third generation consists of Gherardo's seven-year-old son, GHERARDINO. The remaining family member, RINUCCIO, is listed as being 24, which puts him in an in-between generation, although he is a cousin to GHERARDO and MARCO; of course, he stands outside the family in many other ways too. The main rivalries are set up between members of the same age-group. There is a constant struggle, for instance, as to who is really the head of the family: SIMONE, the oldest member and the former mayor of Fucecchio, or ZITA, that one-woman repository of family pride. There are tensions, too, between the middle-executive team player MARCO and the ineffectual harassed GHERARDO, and even more between their wives, the snotty CIESCA and the catty NELLA. And of course everybody despises the rootless *déclassé* BETTO, because he has committed the worst family sin of all—that of being poor.

SIMONE is the cousin of the deceased. He is 70 years of age, which makes him the oldest surviving relative (just). He is the former Mayor of Fucecchio—probably a very small-time office, but the manner sticks to him still. He is the born chairman—pompous, ponderous, judicious, weighing his words, with a total reliance on *Robert's Rules of Order*. As long as the others show him the respect due to his role, he gets along fine; but he is no infighter, and so hasn't a hope of standing up to ZITA. His typical pose is with hands on lapels, or in vest pockets (linked, of course, by a gold chain), chest and belly thrown out, as though warming his coat-tails before an invisible clubroom fire.

ZITA is also a cousin of the deceased. She is listed as 60, but I would put her much closer to 70—only slightly younger than SIMONE. She is the true matriarch, governed by a burning sense of family pride, and a feeling that she alone is the last bastion against the decay of family vales. (The fact, of course, that she hasn't any offspring of her own simply means that she has never learned to compromise those values, as the harried parents GHERARDO and NELLA have learned to do long since.) In appearance, she is something of a dowager: corseted, held in, erect, and aloof. She walks with the aid of a cane, but to give her dignity rather than strength, which she has aplenty. Unfortunately, she has not got SIMONE's power of remaining aloof when the going gets rough; her fighting blood is too strong, and what she loses in dignity she gains in sheer viciousness. The woman is a vulture, nothing less. In the end, it is she who is the true leader of the family, not SIMONE.

BETTO is not a born Donati, merely the husband of Buoso's sister. He is of indefinable age: more than 50, less than 70. What happened to the wife, one doesn't know; BETTO presumably moved out on her long since. I get the impression that he has knocked around the world as a beachcomber, making a small bit of money on some crazy scheme, losing it on a crazier one or spending it on drink, in and out of jails—nothing serious, though. He is probably paid a remittance by SIMONE and ZITA to keep out of the way, but he has a knack for turning up wherever he smells a handout, as here. He is shabbily dressed, with a long coat that can hide a multitude of sins, and can stash away the various things that he pilfers during the course of the opera. This coat makes him seem a cross between a street person and a flasher, though in fact he is not quite either. He is despised by the rest of the family, and despises them in turn for being so stuck-up. He is a drinker, though not necessarily a drunkard. Because of his contacts on the street, he has also his ear to the ground and loves gossip—indeed it is his one bargaining chip with the rest of the family. Despite his faults, I find him the most likeable of the Donatis, with the exception of RINUCCIO (who, however, is rather less interesting).

MARCO is the son of SIMONE and the first-cousin-once-removed of the deceased. He is 45, and thus the senior member of the middle generation. He is very much his father's son, or would like to be, but maybe he doesn't have the qualities that go with it. He is a square in every sense of the word: conservative, reliable, complacent, pompous, dutiful, dull, &c.. Much of the time, he acts as a PR man for his father. He is the typical team-player, the middle-executive who has reached his limit and is just beginning to know it. Despite his air as a man-of-affairs, his wife CIESCA dominates him effortlessly.

GHERARDO is a nephew of the deceased. He is 40 years of age, the husband of NELLA and the proud but harassed father of GHERARDINO (who *really* rules that family!). There are no very strong indications of his character in the score, so I want to make a point of his ineffectuality. He kind of dabs at things, without much result. What with the expense of three mouths to feed, and a job that isn't going too well just now, he has a hard time keeping up with the Marcos. He is myopic and untidy, and probably hasn't stood straight in years. He also is hag-ridden—not so much that he is actually hen-pecked as MARCO is, more that he is already half-submerged by the tide of creeping domesticity.

LA CIESCA is MARCO's wife, 38 years of age. Despite the fact that she isn't a Donati by birth—or maybe because of it—I feel she casts herself very much as a second ZITA, that bastion of family pride. She feels she has married beneath her—not that MARCO isn't a fine man in a good position of respect, but that there are too many other members of the family who can't keep up with their responsibilities, or just don't care how things ought to be done. She is determined to show them, come hell or high water, and she takes the lead (always provided ZITA doesn't get there first). Not having children (this hurts, but she won't admit

it), she is able to dress with a greater sophistication and eye to fashion than poor NELLA, whom she patronizes, despises, and secretly envies. It is very difficult to sympathize with her, despite her strength and drive, for hers is a lacquered shell of great hardness and polish, but utterly empty inside.

NELLA is the wife of GHERARDO and mother of GHERARDINO. She is 34 years of age, but looks older. She is dominated by the pride of motherhood, having produced the only Donati for the coming generation. It is her sole *raison-d'être*, and her only advantage over infertile, frigid CIESCA—but it has worn her down. Not for her, the tailored look and impeccable grooming of CIESCA; she makes do with old woolens, many times repaired: what's the point of spending hours on one's coiffure when one has a real house to run and child to look after? Still, she can get her own back on CIESCA now and again, usually by her gift for catty sarcasm. She has a comfortable relationship of mutual tolerance with GHERARDO, especially as he is the father of her dear GHERARDINO, already the spitting image of his father, and who will grow up to be all that her husband never quite managed to be.

GHERARDINO is 7, the son of GHERARDO and NELLA. He is exactly as one would imagine from the foregoing descriptions of his parents: spoilt, precocious, a pain in the ass. He probably looks better than either of his parents, but his behavior is such as to make everybody's palm tingle. Enough said!

RINUCCIO is the nephew of ZITA and therefore, like MARCO, first-cousin-once-removed of the deceased. I imagine his parents are dead, since he appears to be ZITA's ward. The libretto gives his age as 24, but I would like to play him younger, just coming out of his teens. His love for LAURETTA has all the characteristics of first love, that all-consuming idealistic passion which is as much of the mind as of the body, but which can turn everything equally readily into a heaven or a hell. I feel that, of all the relatives, he was actually the closest to old Buoso: maybe he read to him in his sick-bed; certainly he is the only one really to mourn his death. He is a student, and idealist, independent in spirit, but without independent means as yet, which is of course the problem. Of all the Donatis, he is the only one who should appear perfectly natural, without any trace of caricature.

## The Schicchi Family

GIANNI SCHICCHI is aged about 50. He is a widower, and the father of LAURETTA. As the central figure and grand manipulator of the plot, the characterization of SCHICCHI presents a problem. On the one hand, he must seem larger than life and more colorful: he is, after all, a person who can think up this fantastic plan and leap right into it, cutting right through both convention and decorum, and acting up a storm. On the other hand, he is the main representative in the opera of real living, breathing humanity, the father of the unspoilt LAURETTA, and (as will appear in the epilogue) the mediator with the audience, the eye through which we see the other characters. Both these things are aspects of the