

Class 8: When Farce Gets Real

A. Farce, More or Less

1. Class title 1 (Guglielmo and Dorabella)

You have been staring at this title slide for a while; let's parse it. Of course you realize it is a scene from an opera—fiction, so who cares? But look at these as two real people, and what do you think now? The man is much too close; that caress with the gloved hand seems almost sinister. And what about the woman: is she accepting, or rejecting, or just uncertain what to feel? The scene is from a Dresden production of the 1790 opera *Così fan tutte* (Women are Like That) by **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–91). Nominally, it is an *opera buffa*, not essentially different in kind from the comedies of Rossini and Offenbach we have already enjoyed. But as this picture suggests, there are darker forces under the surface. My title for the class is **When Farce Gets Real**. In the first act, I'll play scenes from Act One, showing how it is set up as a comedy like any other. In the second, I'll focus on some scenes from Act Two that come closer to real life, perhaps uncomfortably so.

2. Section title A (Christof Loy production)

3. Synopsis slide 1 (Glyndebourne production)

This is the video I am going to use as my reference production, a 2006 staging at my own *alma mater*, Glyndebourne, by **Nicholas Hytner**. The two ladies on the DVD cover are sisters, **Fiordiligi** and **Dorabella**.

4. Synopsis slide 2

They are young, but already engaged to two young military officers, **Guglielmo** and **Ferrando**; the pictures come from the company website.

5. Synopsis slide 3

In the prologue, which I shall not play, the men boast to an older friend, **Don Alfonso**, that their fiancées are chastity incarnate. “Don’t you believe it,” says Alfonso; “there is no such thing as a faithful woman.” The men are outraged, but willingly undertake a bet to prove the point. They are to pretend to have been called away to war, but will really return in disguise and attempt to woo the other one’s sweetheart. An absurd premise, admittedly, but this is *opera buffa* after all.

6. Synopsis slide 4

The sisters have a maid, Despina, who knows a lot more about the real world than they do. Alfonso bribes her to encourage them to fall in love with the two strangers who will shortly arrive at their door, but he does not tell her who the strangers really are.

7. Synopsis slide 5

Well, Alfonso is proved right. Over the course of Act Two, both women will submit to the other man. (Submission, in this case, is indicated by an exchange of lockets, but it is pretty clear that this is merely a symbol for sexual submission.) A literal translation of *Così fan tutte* is “All women do it.” The first production I ever saw opened in a men’s locker room—appropriately so, because the framework of the opera is little more than a **locker-room joke**. Which was why I found this trailer so appropriate, which summarizes the whole plot in terms of **mixed doubles—very mixed doubles—in tennis**. The actual production last year in Vienna was more conventional, but the trailer is brilliant.

8. Vienna Volksoper trailer

9. Glyndebourne: “Ah, guarda, sorella” title

I am now going to play enough of Act One from the Glyndebourne video to show how Mozart and his libettist **Lorenzo da Ponte** (1749–1838) set this up as an apparent farce. I’ll skip the scene with the men, but show the first appearance of the women. They are comparing lockets and discussing the qualities of their respective fiancés. But I’d point out two things. The poetic qualities that Fiordiligi sees in hers and the *machismo* that so excites Dorabella are *not* the qualities we will come to associate with the two men, but **the other way around**: it is Dorabella’s fiancé Ferrando who is the poetic one, while Guglielmo, her sister’s fiancé, is *machismo* incarnate. So already Mozart is showing us how this will end up. Perhaps the sisters even realize this themselves, for there is quite a bit of “methinks the lady doth protest too much” in their passionate oaths of eternal fidelity.

10. Glyndebourne: “Ah, guarda, sorella”

11. Glyndebourne: Quintet title

The men get hold of a boat and a few friends from the regiment to stage their departure for the battlefield. There is a melodramatic quintet and some military music, and then another quintet. Before playing this in the Glyndebourne version, I want you to listen to a part of it in audio only. Da Ponte writes the kind of lines you would hear on any airport kerb: “You’ll write me every day,” and so on. But Mozart turns these into something else entirely. Listen for the moment when the voices all begin to sing together; listen for the extraordinary effects of crescendo and diminuendo. I have always felt this to be a goose-walking-over-the grave moment. No matter how this turns out, I think everybody senses that nothing will ever be quite the same again.

12. Audio, crux of the quintet

The Glyndebourne production does not do anything as crude as the shadow I cast over my image, but it is sensitive nonetheless, especially as Mozart continues the serious mood with the famous prayer for a calm sea, “Soave sia il vento.” Even Alfonso has stopped laughing.

13. Glyndebourne: “Deh, scrivermi ogni giorno”

14. Glyndebourne: Sextet title

So Alfonso gets Despina onside, and when the men appear in outrageous Middle Eastern costume, she is hugely amused, but nonetheless pleads their case to the outraged women, who have already decided to go into a period of virtual mourning. The point, anyway, is that this is a scene of sheer farce, with none of the serious shading we got briefly in the Quintet.

15. Glyndebourne: Sextet

16. Glyndebourne: “Non siate ritrosi” title

Alfonso introduces the strangers as his friends and urges the women to at least give them a hearing. At which point, Guglielmo puts the moves on Dorabella, as you see here. She is not unaffected, but Fiordiligi puts a stop to this with a stern aria, and storms out, dragging her sister with her. The men burst out laughing, thinking they have already won, but Alfonso has more stages to his plan.

17. Glyndebourne, Finale I title

For this, the men are instructed to burst in upon the women as though they have taken poison, being too lovesick to live. Despina, in disguise as a doctor, will be called in to cure them, and the women presumably will be so relieved that they will consent to anything. This is the Act One finale. Mozart constructs it like a symphony, with an *allegro* fastish opening movement, a scherzo when the “doctor” arrives, a slow movement, and a *presto-prestissimo* finale. It is another scene of pure farce, mostly with the women and men being treated in pairs, entirely symmetrically. If I were to look for ways of adding more meaningful touches (and I have done 6 productions), I would look at the moment when Dorabella and Fiordiligi are left alone when Despina goes off to fetch the Doctor, and would hope to find detail in the slow moment. I don’t recall exactly what Hytner does, but we can find out.

18. Glyndebourne: Finale I, ensemble

19. Class title 2

B. When the Laughter Stops

20. Section title B

The same joyous picture that I showed before, moving to something a lot less comic. Both are scenes from updated European productions. The one on the screen now seems to show the men in the bedrooms, with the women (rather older women) outside, wondering either which to go into or which they have just come out from. I am going to play some scenes from Act Two, many in more than one version, that explore the two seductions and the tricky problem of how the opera ends up.

21. Glyndebourne, Serenade title

At the beginning of Act Two, the women accept Despina’s advice that it would do no harm to flirt a little while their fiancés are away, and allow Alfonso to escort them to the garden, where the men have set

up an evening serenade. Fiordiligi follows Ferrando to another part of the garden while Guglielmo, half distracted by wondering what is going on between them, begins his seduction of Dorabella. As you see the scene in the Hytner production, try to parse the attitude of the two characters. Is Guglielmo sincere when he says he is only following his oath to Alfonso? And is Dorabella as much in control as she thinks she is?

22. Glyndebourne: Guglielmo/Dorabella duet

23. — stills from the above

So what did you think of the attitude of the two characters? If you have looked through a dozen different productions like I have, you will find that different directors answer the questions differently. Here is the end of it from the **Christof Loy** production in Salzburg. Other than the fact that the Dorabella (**Marianne Crebassa**) is a bit too old for the close-ups, look at how Guglielmo (**Andrè Schuen**) ends the scene; it is the only one I have found where his only motivation is to fulfill his oath.

24. Salzburg: Guglielmo/Dorabella duet, ending

25. Covent Garden: the serenade scene

The current production at London's Royal Opera House needs some explanation. The director, **Jan Philipp Gloger**, plays constantly between theatrical artifice and reality. The women wear modern frocks; Don Alfonso and often the other men appear in period costume; and the set keeps switching between reality (for example a railroad station) and artifice (an eighteenth-century stage set as here). But the acting of the characters leaves nothing to be desired. Follow Dorabella (**Angela Brower**) in this scene, entirely confident that it is *she*, not Guglielmo (**Alessio Arduini**) who controls the action.

26. Covent Garden: Guglielmo/Dorabella duet

27. — still from the above

What did you think of *that*? For me, it is a lot more interesting if the women see through the men's disguises at some point; the question is when each one does so, and when she lets on.

28. Miah Persson as Fiordiligi

Meanwhile, Ferrando has been putting pressure on Fiordiligi. But when he sees the anguish she is in, he abruptly withdraws. Fiordiligi, much shaken, begins a long aria, "Per pietà, bel idol mio," that is essentially a prayer to the absent Guglielmo to forgive her for her weakness. Suddenly we are not in comic opera at all; this is one of Mozart's longest and most serious creations. And also one of the richest; listen for the horn solo that punctuates the return of the theme. **Miah Persson** again, in the Hytner production.

29. Glyndebourne: "Per pietà," extract

Two things happen after this, however. Guglielmo admits to Ferrando that he has had Dorabella, and Dorabella plays the virgin-no-longer card with Fiordiligi. In a desperate attempt to escape the situation, Fiordiligi calls for an uniform that Guglielmo has somehow left around the house, and puts it on, meaning to join him at the front. Which of course is a big give-away, because when Ferrando catches

her, she has no explanation other than that she is trying to escape her love. Their scene is fairly long, beginning with melodrama and ending with melodious harmonizing, both relatively conventional. But in between comes a section that is not conventional at all. Instead of putting pressure on her, Ferrando pulls back, and sings his loveliest melody in the entire opera, gently persuading her. Listen to that gorgeous oboe melody, just before she gives in. We will hear this first in audio only, then watch the complete scene from Glyndebourne.

30. “Volgi a me,” with score

31. Glyndebourne: Ferrando/Fiordiligi duet

32. The end of the opera

So how the heck do you bring all this to an end? The picture shows the end of the opera in a production in Zurich. It looks pretty bleak, as indeed the situation is. The Act II finale begins with a wedding, with Despina in another of her disguises as a Notary. But then the military music from the first act is heard offstage. The men rush off, ostensibly to hide, but really to change back into their uniforms. And come back in, to catch their supposedly-faithful fiancées dressed to be married to someone else. There are recriminations and abject apologies. But look at what is scrawled on the wall at the back. The opera is called *Così fan tutte*, with the feminine noun—but could it not equally be *Così fan tutti*, making the *men* to blame? Indeed. Anyway, Alfonso reminds the couples that they are supposed to be engaged, gets them back together in presumably the original pairing, and all ends with a cheerful moral, a lesson well learned. But *need* it end that way. And if it does, do they have to be cheerful about it? I will end with a montage of three different productions, each of which comes to a different solution. Since you have not watched from the beginning, I will put up titles explaining the situation.

33. Montage of final scenes

34. Class title 3 (“So was it a comedy after all?”)