

Portraits: More than Paint



4. Treading the Boards

March 12, 2024

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PRESENTING THE LIFE OF A REAL PERSON ON THE STAGE is not in itself the equivalent of painting their portrait. For one thing, the action of a drama is quite different from the stillness and inner focus of a good portrait. Secondly, most portraits arise from a present-tense interaction between artist and sitter, whereas the subjects of most bio-dramas are long since dead.

This class will consider some exceptions to this: the role of a Shakespearean soliloquy or operatic aria in creating the needed stillness and penetration; the fact that a live actor on a live stage (we are excluding film) brings the character into a different kind of present tense; and a few special works created around figures who were still living at the time of their premiere.

Given the topic, the class will consist almost entirely of video clips, introduced with the minimum amount of discourse, but preferably interspersed with discussion. *rb.*

A. Speak the Speech, I Pray You

Three real characters expressing their innermost thoughts in soliloquies from spoken plays or musicals, and a fourth from a one-man play that is itself a soliloquy.

Shakespeare: *Richard III* (1593), opening speech (Stephen Stanton)

Shaffer: *Amadeus* (1979), Salieri's monologue (Paul Scofield)

MacLiammóir: *The Importance of Being Oscar* (1960), ending

Miranda: *Hamilton* (2015), duel scene (Lin-Manuel Miranda)

B. Living History

While there have been several plays written around real people still alive at the time, the works we can most illustrate from clips of live theatre are a musical and two ballets.

Brickman and Elice: *Jersey Boys* (Joe Pesci at the 2006 Tonys)

Marston/Feeney: *The Cellist* (2020), (Lauren Cuthbertson)

Ashton/Elgar: *Enigma Variations* (1968), opening and vars 1, 7, 8, 9

C. The King Sings

The operatic equivalent of the Shakespearean soliloquy is the solo aria. Verdi's aria for King Philip II in *Don Carlo* is one of the most penetrating.

Verdi: *Don Carlo* (1884), "Ella giammai m'amò" (Ferruccio Furlanetto)

D. Women, not Queens

Three women as featured in recent operas, who could hardly be more different: a nun, an escaped slave, and a sex icon.

Okoye: *Harriet Tubman* (2014), "I am Harriet" (Janinah Burnett)

Heggie: *Dead Man Walking* (2000), "This journey" (Joyce DiDonato)

Turnage: *Anna Nicole* (2011), start and end (Eva-Marie Westbroek)

Sir Frederick **Ashton** (1904–88, *English choreographer*), Marshall **Brickman** (1939– , *American writer*), Sir Edward **Elgar** (1857–1934, *English composer*), Rick **Elice** (1956– , *American writer*), Philip **Feeney** (1954– , *Irish composer*), Jake **Heggie** (1961– , *American composer*), Micheál **MacLiammóir** (1899–1978, *Irish actor and writer*), Cathy **Marston** (1975– , *English choreographer*), Terrence **McNally** (1938–2020, *American playwright*), Lin-Manuel **Miranda** (1980– , *American composer*), Nkeiru **Okoye** (1972– , *American composer*), Sir Peter **Shaffer** (1928–2016, *English playwright*), William **Shakespeare** (1564–1616, *English playwright*), Richard **Thomas** (1964– , *English writer and composer*), Mark-Anthony **Turnage** (1960– , *English composer*), Giuseppe **Verdi** (1813–1901, *Italian composer*)

The course website is www.brunyate.com/portraits
I will always answer mail to rogerbrunyate@gmail.com