religious conservatives fixated on beginning-of-life and end-of-life issues, yet, as he shows, our belief that happiness is the measure of life has a direct bearing on both abortion and euthanasia. The first-trimester fetus lacks the rudimentary nervous system to experience self-awareness. Without self-awareness there can be no happiness, and thus, in the happiness-is-all worldview, no need for life. By the same token, unhappiness inevitably increases in old age. We are moving, Dworkin predicts, toward accepting physician-assisted suicide as a preemptive strike against the miseries of decrepitude.

The book bogs down only once, when Dworkin, straining to find a cure for our happiness addiction, advises patients to read philosophy and doctors to take courses in the humanities, so that they can relate to each other on a deeper level. This would never work in America, because we know that introspective people tend to be unhappy. But at least Dworkin himself has read widely, and it shows on every page. His best observation is reminiscent of a poem by Wallace Stevens or the baleful imprecations of ancient Greek drama: "And there is something unpleasant about their happiness, something lacking in warmth. There is nothing sunny in the sun; it's more like a hot moon. Their happiness radiates unwholesomeness because it emanates from an unnatural source, not from real life."

■ Florence King is the author of 10 books, including *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady* (1985), *With Charity Toward None: A Fond Look at Misanthropy* (1992), *The Florence King Reader* (1995), and, most recently, *STET, Damnit!*, a collection of her *National Review* columns from 1991 to 2002.

Final Bow

Reviewed by Albert Innaurato

THE TOUGHEST SHOW ON EARTH: My Rise and Reign at the Metropolitan Opera.

By Joseph Volpe, with Charles Michener. Knopf. 304 pp. $25.95

For 123 years, New York's Metropolitan Opera has been one of the greatest purveyors of the art form in the world. Its stage has been graced by such legendary figures as Enrico Caruso and Rosa Ponselle. In the 1930s, it proved that Richard Wagner's music dramas could sell out the house, and such Wagner specialists as Kirsten Flagstad and Lauritz Melchior virtually took up residence. For many years, well into the 1940s, the Metropolitan produced new and very interesting operas on a vast scale (the old Met on Broadway was immense, as is the new Met, now 40 years old, at Lincoln Center) while also helping to keep familiar works alive. The podium has been home to Gustav Mahler, Arturo Toscanini, and, more recently, James Levine, who has transformed an uneven orchestra into a world-class ensemble. The Met has produced opera seven times a week every season since the early 1950s, often with the most famous singers in the world. Only a few European houses can match that schedule, and they have fewer seats and far more government funding.

Joseph Volpe has been the Met's general manager for 16 years, the first to rise to the top from the working ranks of the house. Now, having announced plans to retire later this year, he has written his memoir.

Those familiar with Volpe's scheming ways will note a queer passage late in the book. He speaks glowingly of a Swedish soprano named Erika Sunnegårdh, even likening her to the legendary Rosa Ponselle, though it appears that he has never heard Sunnegårdh in a complete performance. When writing this, Volpe was aware that the all-but-unknown Sunnegårdh was scheduled to make her Met debut on April 13, 2006. But he couldn't possibly have known that she would substitute for the beloved Karita Mattila in a broadcast performance of Beethoven's *Fidelio* on April 1, and would stand in for Mattila on another occasion before the scheduled debut. The broadcast got enormous hype, includ-

ing a huge article in *The New York Times*, which has been rather chary with its Met coverage in the past decade. Such an article takes time to set up and place. "If Erika Sunnegårdh makes anything like the splash Ponselle did, it will be front-page news," Volpe writes—coyly?—in his memoir. When the article appeared, several divas e-mailed me to wonder what the "indisposed" Mattila had been paid or promised to stand down. It's just like Volpe, many thought, to try to rig something thrilling to give his book a grand sendoff.

In the event, it was a damp, if not wet, squib. On the radio broadcast, poor Sunnegårdh got lost in her big act 1 aria. In the house, her voice seemed relatively small and undeveloped save for the very top, a surprising problem for a woman of 40. But, in keeping with the Met's current artistic dictates, she *is* pretty, and able on stage.

Maybe it's just a coincidence, and Volpe didn't manipulate Sunnegårdh's timing or publicity. But that doesn't let him off the hook for straining credulity in his book. He writes, for instance, that he once scoured the Met archives for something to read and emerged with the memoir of the incomparable Giulio Gatti-Casazza, the Met's longest-ruling general manager, who served from 1908 to 1935. (Since 1908, the Met has had only four general managers.) Now, Volpe is too well known as defiantly anti-intellectual—a cover, perhaps, for insecurity about his ignorance of opera—for this to wash. One can imagine him down in the archives only to bury dead bodies. Like a lot of this book, the incident reads as though it were cooked up by Volpe's scrivener, Charles Michener, an editor at *The New Yorker*.

One assumes that Volpe's memoir was pitched to publishers as a Dickensian tale. Born in Brooklyn in 1940, the Pip-like spawn of Italian immigrants, our Joe rises through hard work, luck with mentors, and a big heart to joust with and best the billionaire snobs on the Met's board. There's something a little fishy about this, too. Unlike many children of immigrants in his generation, Volpe mostly grew up in suburban comfort on Long Island, not in an Italian-speaking inner-city ghetto. Though his was not an opera-loving family, his maternal grandmother sometimes played 78s of the intermezzo from Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*. He had middle-class and even upper-middle-class opportunities (his uncle was an important Washington lawyer). He just didn't take them. Rather, he devoted his high school years to flashy dressing and doo-wop (so he says), and lasted only a week at St. John's University in Queens.

Volpe fell in love with cars, which, he claims, later enabled him to relate to the hallowed conductor Herbert von Karajan. (Karajan hated artistic and intellectual types—they were too hard to dupe.) Volpe's father got him a bank loan, an uncle helped him form a corporation, and, at 17, he opened an Amoco gas station on Long Island. He promptly started a price war, but still managed to get elected the most successful young businessman in Nassau County when he was 20. He also made the first of three marriages (he has seven children).

A year later, in 1961, leaking gas in the repair shop ignited, and Volpe was burned out of his service station. So he fled to that pit of evil, the theater district, dominated in those years by the old Met (the Met moved into the new Lincoln Center in 1966). Not a union member, Volpe took every job he could get in that union-controlled environment. Late at night, he changed the marquees on the Astor, the Victoria, and the Paramount—long hours and dangerous work at the time—and then crawled back to a cheap, cockroach-filled flop house, rarely sleeping at his Long Island home with his wife and kids. His earnings took a major hit. Why did he do it? One assumes that this rather sheltered young man was on the lookout for adventure, but Volpe, rarely introspective, never explains.

Soon, one of his mentors got him to take the union test, even though he told Joe, "You

Joseph Volpe (left) shares a Met moment with tenor Placido Domingo.

don't know how to keep your mouth shut." When Volpe easily passed, the mentor said, "You want to build the best and biggest sets in the world? . . . You do that at the Metropolitan Opera." So Volpe went to the Met and got hired as an apprentice carpenter. He mentions passing the bust of Enrico Caruso, outside the office of the then–general manager (the famously elegant and icy Rudolf Bing). "I nodded at the great tenor, and he nodded back" may be the cheesiest line in the book, but it has plenty of competition.

Volpe's first assignment was to go out for coffee for the other carpenters. His first decision was to refuse. "Every apprentice gets coffee," he was told. "I don't," he said. More such standoffs with superiors followed. Even so, Volpe rose to master carpenter in 1966, technical director in 1978, assistant manager in 1981, and the top job in 1990.

No doubt there's an interesting story in his ascent: How he courted and abandoned mentors. (He ruefully admits that claims of betrayal by John Dexter, the late director of production, might contain a nugget of truth.) How he slipped past the wasps' nest surrounding the outwardly genial conductor James Levine, one of the more powerful musical presences in the Met's history. How he positioned himself to control those areas of operations outside Levine's interest. Volpe is an operator of near genius, and his patience was admirable. When, in his own mind, it was finally his turn to take charge, the board considered some 400 people, none of them named Volpe. The board selected a courtly man with a British accent, who proved hopeless. Seven months later, in 1990, Volpe was in—but as "general director," not "general manager." For that title, he had to wait until 1993.

Volpe provides few fresh details here that reveal the real inner workings of the Met. He rehashes, for an entire chapter, his controversial firing of soprano Kathleen Battle, but fails to note that the poor woman had been a problem for years and that he

waited until she stopped selling out the house to rid himself of her. He calls Luciano Pavarotti and Placido Domingo his "Siamese twins," an appellation neither would appreciate. Of course, he doesn't speak of Pavarotti's inability to read music, which cost the Met his presence on stage and a fully funded recording of Verdi's *La Forza del Destino* in the late 1990s, or of Domingo's altering of sections of most of the scores he has performed in the house since 1995 to be sung in a lower key. Volpe does, however, boast repeatedly about his friendship with Rudy Giuliani. To Volpe, music doesn't seem to matter as much as power.

In answer to the often-raised criticism that the Met does too few new works, Volpe remarks that not even the esteemed Met archivist Robert Tuggle could name the composers of several new operas presented there in the past: *The Man Without a Country*, *The Island God*, and *The Warrior*. But Tuggle would surely know the names Walter Damrosch, Gian Carlo Menotti, and Bernard Rogers. More important, in the very teeth of the Depression, the Met produced Deems Taylor's *Peter Ibbetson*, Howard Hanson's *Merry Mount*, and Louis Gruenberg's *The Emperor Jones*.

Although there were crises during Volpe's Met tenure, this slim volume leaves one with the odd sense that he didn't really matter.

By contrast, from roughly 1985 to 1995, Volpe—with the support of the ad man Bruce Crawford, his champion on the all-important, notably conservative board of directors, and a staggeringly rich patron from Kansas named Sybil Harrington—presented the eye-numbing, soul-killing, *derrière-garde*, stupidly grand productions of the played-out director Franco Zeffirelli. Never has there been a less human *La Bohème*, a more bloated and preposterous *Tosca*, a more garish *Turandot*, or a more zoo-like *Carmen*, with greater attention paid the donkeys than the cigarette girl. Though Volpe's Met did stage the occasional new opera (not always by the best or most stage-savvy composers), masterworks by Michael Tippett, Hans Werner Henze, Gyorgy Ligeti, and Olivier Messiaen were ignored, and no stream was developed to encourage new American works. (Peter Gelb, Volpe's successor, has promised to change that.) A steady developmental process is important for attracting opera-shy composers to the form, because it lets them find and fix problems before opening night.

For those with an interest in the maze of the Met, Johanna Fiedler's *Molto Agitato: The Mayhem Behind the Music at the Metropolitan Opera* (2001) is probably the best insider guide, though it's still very guarded. To get a sense of one of Volpe's more eccentric mentors, try John Dexter's *The Honourable Beast: A Posthumous Autobiography* (1993). For a sense of Volpe himself, though, you'll have to look elsewhere than his memoir. When I interviewed him for *Forbes* in 1999, he talked about his difficult relationship with his father, as though a need to prove something to a doubting parent fueled his ambition and energy. But this paternal conflict gets drained of all import here.

Although there were crises during his tenure, this slim volume leaves one with the odd sense that Volpe didn't really matter. The "hot" Met that took off in the late 1980s didn't last past the mid-1990s. Attendance has fallen badly, and many of the once-new productions now seem humorously old-fashioned. Volpe didn't attract a younger, nontourist audience, or find powerful new works. What's the value of an institution that costs so much to attend and delivers so little? A frank and detailed account of Volpe's career and, more broadly, the "corporatization" of American not-for-profit art institutions might be enlightening, shocking, and sad. But this collection of trivial anecdotes and stale headlines is of no use.

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