

Admiring La Stupenda [Edinburgh 2019]

By Daniel Somerville

Script	Action	Sound	Light & tech
	<p>Pre-set: In the downstage position a duvet, pillow and sheets form a bed. A long white cloth is part of this.</p> <p>Daniel greets the audience as they enter. Chatting friendly.</p> <p>He is dressed in white shirt, black jacket and black trousers.</p>	<p>CUE Track 01: Lucia overture</p>	<p>Q1 Pre-set Corridor of light (50%) runs centre stage upstage-downstage. House lights on</p> <p>Q1.5 CUE House lights down Corridor of light 100% some general wash fill.</p>

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<p>Daniel speaks: The first part of the overture to <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> by Gaetano Donizetti. It is based on Sir Walter Scott's <i>The Bride of Lammermoor</i>. It is Italian, mid-19th century, composed in what was known as the age of 'bel canto' – which literally translates as 'beautiful singing'. So, you see the emphasis here is on music, on vocalisation, on the voice.</p> <p>When Joan Sutherland sang the role at Covent Garden in February 1959, despite the fact she had sung there many times before and even had a loyal following of fans, it was this production by the late Franco Zeffirelli, who died earlier this year, that shot her to international fame. With some critics heralding her as 'the voice of the century'.</p> <p>Among its many delights, <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> contains one very special scene – the Mad Scene – now it's not uncommon to find a mad scene in Italian 19th century operas, it was a very popular convention at the time. But the mad scene in Lucia is an especially fine example.</p>			

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<p>High notes and trills, runs and arpeggios: and drama – unabashed melodrama. It requires a coloratura voice – this implies colouration and is associated with ornament. If Joan may have had some competition for greatest voice of the century, there are none who can challenge her for the crown of greatest coloratura soprano – perhaps none ever. She was a voice apart. After February 1959 the highest cultural capital you can imagine was to have heard Joan Sutherland sing the mad scene from Lucia di Lammermoor. Let me read you some of her reviews:</p> <p>In 2010, purely coincidentally the year that Joan Sutherland died, I choreographed a work called <i>Mad Scene</i> that used the mad scene from Lucia as its soundtrack. It was a piece for three dancers from different disciplines. I wasn't in it – except for at the premier, where I made a cameo appearance by way of introducing to the work. And that was the night that Sanjoy Roy reviewed the work for <i>The Guardian</i> – now, don't worry this isn't revenge art – the review read like this:</p>	<p>Turning upstage</p> <p>Daniel takes reviews from his jacket pocket and reads them: Appendix 1</p> <p>Daniel reads the review: Appendix 2</p>		

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<p>OK. It's not a great review for an aspiring choreographer. OK, Fine. But what it did do is set me on a path to discover what it means when people said to me – your work is so 'operatic'. But before I get on to talking about my research – indulge me – I'm going to try to recreate that moment for you.</p> <p>And then I swept the curtains aside to reveal the diaphanous bride etc ... now when I dance it, it becomes more and more duck-like. I can't escape his words. But those were the words that set me on a path to discover what operatic movement is.</p> <p>So, I have to thank Mr Roy. And so, I embarked on my PhD research.</p>	<p>Daniel goes upstage. Takes off his jacket to reveal a blood stained shirt [beat]</p> <p>Daniel dances – mostly centre stage and upstage centre</p>	<p>CUE: Track 02 – Lucia intro</p>	<p>Q2 General wash warm 40% – corridor still in</p> <p>Q3 Corridor out – warm wash up 70%</p>

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<p>And now I have a PhD. I have a PhD in, well, this... that I'm about to show you. I've been watching opera singers, seeing how they move, sketching them, interviewing them and then using embodiment techniques associated with a contemporary Japanese movement practice called Butoh, I've been working out how to extract the movement from singers and place it into the bodies of dancers, including my own. And that basically was my methodology...</p> <p>But, I'll try to keep technical and academic terms to a minimum. This is not, after all, a lecture. But if you do have any questions, please ... don't put your hand up or call them out. Just hold onto the question and hopefully the piece will at some point answer it for you, through the actions or words. So, really, I suppose, I'd like you to think of this more like a piece of ... well, theatre. And in theatre, when a question is raised, we hold on to the question and hope the words or actions answer that question. Now in this case it may be more about how the piece makes you feel, and in this way, I suppose I'd like you to think of this more like a piece of opera. Because opera, you see, has this ability to bypass</p>	<p>Daniel adlibs information about his methodology, see Appendix 3</p>		

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<p>your cool intellects and appeal directly to your emotions. And that's partly what my PhD was about. I used the term 'operatic-ness'.</p> <p>And I identified certain gestures that re-occur in the bodies of singers regardless of their age or voice-type, or where they are in their career. Such as the Absence gesture. Something is being sung about, that's left – left upstage right, but could just as easily be downstage left. And you see how this gesture faces forwards? That's because at key moments in opera, the singers have to be able to see the conductor. Of course, singers can sing upstage, some can sing upside-down, but at certain points, they'll need to see the conductor – so a lot of the gesture face forwards. And singers embody the music. I mean it's issuing from them, and when they are not singing, the orchestra is vibrating up through the floor. So, singers move to the music and face forward – now these two things are completely antithetical to contemporary dance. No wonder Mr Roy wasn't that impressed. But I love all these quirky things about opera.</p>	<p>Daniel demonstrate the absence gesture</p> <p>Daniel faces upstage and then looks through his legs at the audience</p>		

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<p>I love opera. And it's funny isn't it because people that go to the theatre, they're theatre goers, but if you go to the opera – you're an opera lover. So, I can assure you, I'm a lover, not a goer.</p> <p>And more specifically you might think of me as an opera queen. Yes, by virtue of the fact that I'm evidently a gay man who likes opera. But that isn't all it is. The opera queen is an identity from a bygone age. Before Stonewall, before gay rights and gay marriage... More closeted, but none the less very visible. The opera queen was a very visible presence, a subversive presence, right in the heart of the establishment. Opera queens are more uptight – with a really encyclopaedic knowledge of opera. You know, every date that so and so performed, all the recordings, and will she won't she reach the F sharp like she did in Mexico City. And all the programmes filed in order.</p>			

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<p>And the CD or LP collection ordered not alphabetically but by genre and then within each genre, chronologically by date of composition – or at least, that’s how I do mine. And typically, there would be a younger lover who’s not really that interested in opera. And an opera queen is the kind of gay man who perhaps lives with his mother. I don’t. I don’t live with my mother – though I do have a younger partner and to be fair he’s not that interested in opera.</p> <p>But, well, you know, that puts me in mind of... I have a photograph of my mother, it was taken in the 60s and she’s on the beach in St Ives in a little red bikini and head band, and she looks like Sophia Loren. She’s got two babies with her, that’s my older brothers, I wasn’t even born. So, bizarrely I have a kind of memory of my mother that’s from before I was born, and I’m sure Baudrillard would have something to say about that.</p> <p>But I wanted to tell you about opera queens. Because I do think that there is some kind of value... that they/we see opera and therefore the world, kind of differently.</p>			

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<p>You know it's about harnessing multiple meanings and dual realities – the performer and the performed – collage, fragmentation, the manipulation of the voice, the manipulation of time ... [pause] ... these are postmodern performance strategies that opera has been using for over 400 years. A fleeting emotion might be sung over 8 minutes (25 if it's Wagner). We might be watching the drama in front of us but we are also thinking about the singer and their career, their other roles, successes and scandals – it's very intertextual in that regard. And I might be thinking about the cute man along the row and will I see him at the bar later. You see, I've never really been one for bars and clubs – opera houses have always proved to be fruitful hunting ground (Massenet, let me tell you attracts a particularly kinky crowd. I had my first experience of BDSM after meeting a man in the amphitheatre of the ROH during a performance of <i>Manon</i>). Opera, you see, is about sex. Which is why I've created this theatrical conceit of my bedroom. Maybe we could have a more intimate lighting state for that?</p>	<p>Daniel looks at an audience member</p> <p>Daniel takes off his trousers</p> <p>Daniel indicates towards the bed</p>		<p>Q4 Focus around bedroom – downstage centre – low warm wash around</p>

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<p>Because you need to picture me as a younger man, in my bedsit in Balham, terribly excited about the latest piece of opera that I've heard and I've invited someone over to hear it, and later we might have sex. Or I might have invited someone over for sex and then just surprised them with a little opera.</p> <p>The other thing that qualifies me as an opera queen is my singular devotion to one diva. And that is obviously Joan Sutherland – La Stupenda</p> <p>I could tell you a whole bunch of biographical information about her, she was Australian, she came to fame in the 60s, she died at home in Switzerland, but you can get that from books or the Internet. I want to tell you about <i>my</i> experience of Joan Sutherland. And to do that we need to go first of all to London in the 80s and I'm on a bus passing Embankment station and I've just been to Balham library and I'd borrowed a cassette – and I pop it into my Walkman.</p>	<p>Lowering himself onto the bed</p>	<p>Track 03 – Casta Diva</p>	

Script	Action	Sound	Light & tech
<p>[As the music plays] So if you've never heard her, you are hearing her now the way I first heard her. Now Joan Sutherland wasn't famous for being a great actor (Norman Ayrton, her acting and movement coach said that she what had what's known as GPE – 'general pained expression' but he also hailed her as the best in the business for knowing how to fall down) ...</p> <p>and she didn't have terribly good enunciation – you could barely tell she was singing sometimes, but that voice, that silvery, no, golden voice. It was very agile, and really powerful, and high, she could sing very high and very loudly at the top.</p> <p>Now in this opera that you are hearing – this is <i>Norma</i>. She plays a Druid priestess, a virgin priestess. You know you get this little instrumental introduction and you're waiting, you're waiting for that voice...</p> <p>She had a very limited range of movement, an arm, a hand, a heaving of the chest, a tilting of the head – so expressive ...</p> <p>You can hear the voice now – and this is about half power, listen you know it's coming ...</p> <p>Ahh, I think you get my point – you can fade it our now.</p>	<p>As the music plays Daniel, using the bedding, dresses as Norma and speaks over the music</p> <p>At this point, the image of Norma is complete</p>	<p>Manually fade out Casta Diva</p>	

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<p>So, the next time I heard her I was at a party in Edinburgh. Now Edinburgh is significant only because although Joan was Australian she had Scottish parentage. And the party was being hosted by a very typical opera queen of the type I described earlier – and I told him how much I had enjoyed ‘Casta Diva’ and he said “Ah, but then you haven’t heard the duet ‘Miro O Norma’ – you haven’t heard the rest of the opera”. And he went to his LP collection – which was meticulously catalogued, so he knew exactly how to grab what he needed for this demonstration (opera queens are also evangelists you know) - and he put it on his record player, stopped the party and we all listened entranced.</p> <p>[As the music plays] Now this voice, this is not Joan, but if there were ever a mezzo soprano to match her soprano its Marilyn Horne. Deep, rich, but also agile, powerful.</p> <p>Listen ...</p> <p>You see with this duet, you get to hear one of the singers and then the other, but you are waiting for that moment when the voices come together ...</p>	<p>[In a camp Scottish accent]</p> <p>Daniel takes the mattress protector – which was a headdress and wraps it around his shoulders</p>	<p>Track 04 – Mira O Norma</p>	

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<p>you're just waiting for that moment. Here... She stops and Joan starts.</p> <p>You hear that same golden tone but shined to a high polish.</p> <p>Now by this point in the opera Norma and Adalgisa, two virgin Druid priestesses, have realised that they have fallen in love with a Roman soldier and it turns out later, it is the same Roman soldier. Norma has already had two children by him, so not so virginal after all.</p> <p>But actually no one in the audience gives a damn about the story, they are seeing two famous singers – like shimmering statues. It's a moment in history – Joan Sutherland and Marilyn Horne are about to sing, together... here... So sensual...</p> <p>You know when you hear one singer in the opera house the voice reverberates in your chest and it activates your throat – you feel the voice in you – it penetrates you. But with two voices – they penetrate each other and they penetrate you – double penetration. I did mention that opera is about sex, right?</p> <p>Because frankly, if the sex you're having doesn't feel like this, then I don't think you're doing it right.</p>	<p>Daniel dances – downstage centre floorwork</p>		

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<p>Opera is full of duets like this, two men, two women, sometimes a woman dressed as a man. Erotic, sensual.</p> <p>But listen opera's not all about these nice aria moments, it's not all about the 'opera light' – because immediately after this you'll get what's called the cabaletta, it's much faster, much more difficult, more technically difficult – can we skip to the next track because you'll hear ...</p> <p>[As music plays] ... its more rumpety pumpety. These two amazing singers just showing off together, if we skip to the end now we'll hear it gets more and more difficult. And you know the high note is coming. Joan would reach the high note and then fall down – there was the high note and then the fall. This great towering woman would float to the floor.</p> <p>And always on time.</p>	<p>Daniel is rising, quickly dressing up in various bits of bedding that he grabs, and then falling repeatedly</p>	<p>Track 05: high note compilation</p>	<p>Q4.5: bedroom fade out Q5: overhead spot fade in – partial warm wash remains</p> <p>Q6: Focus around bedding – downstage centre, warm partial wash around</p>

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<p>But I wanted to tell you why I called this piece <i>Admiring La Stupenda</i>.</p> <p>Why Stupenda? Well the Italians called Joan ‘La Stupenda’ and it wasn’t because she’d been singing one of these big bel canto numbers like we’ve been listening to, no. It was in 1960 in Venice she sang the role of Alcina, which is from a Handel opera – now that’s baroque – its more intricate, more disciplined – she was actually responsible for a revival in interest in Baroque music in the 1950s and 60s because here was a singer who could actually sing this demanding music.</p> <p>Alcina is a sorceress – to be fair though what you are about to hear is not music for the role of Alcina – it’s an aria for the role of Morgana – but it’s the most well-known aria in the opera and so when it came to recording it Joan stepped into that role momentarily to demonstrate her abilities. Now that might sound like a diva move, but anyone who worked with Joan will tell you she was anything but a diva – she was very down to earth, she did a lot to help less experienced singers.</p>	<p>Dressing as Alcina using the bedding</p>	<p>Cues on next page</p>	<p>Cues on next page</p>

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<p>You'll hear the decoration in the voice – and as she repeats the first section, you'll hear decoration on the decorations; ornamentation – it's called <i>fioritura</i> – which means flowery. And then of course, she just eases up to the high note.</p>	<p>Daniel walks to upstage centre</p> <p>When Daniel in position...</p> <p>Daniel dances, gradually circling wider and wider, catching bubbles</p> <p>Daniel finishes dancing and returns to downstage centre</p>	<p>Track 6: Alcina</p>	<p>Q6.5 fade to dark Begin bubbles</p> <p>Q7: [snap on with music] bright white spots on Daniel surrounded by bubbles Q7.1 – 7.3 half way through track, fade up more cold lights around space Bubbles off</p> <p>Q8: warm bedroom</p>

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<p>But I digress, I'm sorry. I was telling you why I called this piece <i>Admiring La Stupenda</i>. I am also referencing Kazuo Ohno's performance, <i>Admiring L'Argentina</i>, a Butoh performance, in which he was remembering a performance that he'd seen of a famous flamenco dancer called L'Argentina and within that he was also contemplating his mother; he was thinking about his mother and I have also been thinking about my mother as I have been making this. Memories, thoughts, feelings about the dancer in his case and the singer in mine, converge with those memories of mothers.</p> <p>Most of my memories are fairly generic, occasional Sunday roasts, pink blancmange on Boxing Day. Food wasn't really my mum's forte. A salad would be half a tomato, four slices of cucumber and a couple of lettuce leaves smothered in salad cream. Tea was mostly beans on toast and if you were hungry – there's frozen bread in the freezer. She would weigh out the Corn Flakes so me and my brothers</p>			

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<p>wouldn't argue over who had the most and she'd number the eggs so they would last. I mean she had three growing boys and a limited budget. But my mum had one special treat for herself – she would have the top-of-the-milk in her coffee in the morning. And when I was old enough, I was allowed to make it for her and I was allowed to open a new bottle even if we hadn't finished the last one. You see my mum struggled to put on weight so it was justified as a medical necessity. My mum was the kind of person though, who didn't like to 'bother' the doctor.</p> <p>It was my mum who indirectly introduced me to opera. My mum's celebrity crush was Harry Belafonte and he had recorded <i>Carmen Jones</i>. I would listen to my mum's EP of <i>Carmen Jones</i> over and over, relishing that music, and it was Marilyn Horne who sang Carmen. But my mum's music taste was more Country & Western – Loretta Lyn, Patsy Cline. I'd go to C&W dances with her – she taught me to Waltz. One time she surprised us all by appearing in the back of a truck, a float in the Deal Carnival, in cowboy boots and mini skirt and a Stetson, collecting for some charity or other.</p>	<p>Daniel expands. See Appendix 4</p>		

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<p>In the 1980s Joan Sutherland did something completely unexpected. She recorded the role of Turandot. It is not a coloratura role – it is a role for a dramatic soprano. Despite the doubts of critics before its release, it has gone on to become the quintessential recording of the opera.</p> <p>In the aria ‘In questa regia’ she tells how a female ancestor had been mistreated by a man. Since then, this princess of a mythical ancient Peking has set riddles for her suitors and if they fail to answer them correctly...</p>	<p>Throat slitting gesture</p>		

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<p>Turandot is not a weak and feeble woman dying for the love of a man, she is not sick or suicidal as many of Puccini's heroines have been. She is strong, resolute. She had a firm moral framework.</p> <p>[As music plays] And that reminds me of my mother. Strong, capable. She was a librarian, she founded two libraries. When she was looking after her late husband, she was also running a business. Even in retirement she volunteered in a bookshop. When my father had an affair, she refused to divorce him. Her mother was a Methodist and so my mother didn't believe in divorce. It wasn't until she met my step-dad that my dad was able to sue her for divorce. When they went to live in Lanzarote in the Canary Islands, she wasn't like other ex-pats, she learned Spanish, lived in a little village in the hills, completely integrated. She taught me many things...</p> <p>My first memory is of sitting in a pushchair – passing some privet hedges. That was suburban Sittingbourne.</p> <p>We went to London Zoo. I was a toddler and it was the first time I'd seen a person with dwarfism... I pointed and laughed. She said: "You never laugh at other people – we don't do that."</p>	<p>Daniel is dressing as Turandot</p>	<p>Track 7: In questa regia (the level should be low while I'm speaking – loud in one part – then low again – then loud when I have finished talking)</p>	

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<p>One day we were passing a church in the car. There was a sign outside that said 'To the glory of God' which for some reason I decided to say out loud as [<i>sneeringly</i>] 'To the glory of God'. She stopped the car and told me that we never disrespect people's religion.</p> <p>And then one day when I was very young. I'd been sent to bed early. I slept on the bottom bunk and wrote a sign and stuck it to the bed above my head. 'I hate mummy'</p> <p>And then there was the time I came out to her. She looked at me and said. 'I know. You have to remember Daniel, I have known you your whole life and you've only known me for half of mine.'</p>	<p>Silent scream</p> <p>Daniel dances</p> <p>As music finishes Daniel has returned to bedroom</p>	<p>Here the volume level needs to rise and then come back down again after the scream</p> <p>Here the level rises</p>	<p>Q9: Red backlit, white patches fade in – warm bedroom fades out</p> <p>Q10: warm bedroom</p>

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<p>But I digress again – Here’s me going on about my mum. I ‘m supposed to be telling you about my experience of Joan Sutherland. I remember the recording of <i>Turandot</i> coming out, but she never sang it live, and well, also, I wasn’t in Venice in 1960 for <i>Alcina</i> – I wasn’t even born then.</p> <p>But if I had a time machine, I wouldn’t go back there. I’d go back to 1959 Covent Garden – her debut as <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> – her breakthrough performance. She became an overnight superstar.</p> <p>Now the thing is I might have seen Joan Sutherland sing <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> at Covent Garden. My memory is unfortunately incomplete. In the 80s I went to a performance but to be honest with you I didn’t buy a programme (two singers sang the role that season). I know I queued from 2am, which is an indication that I might, I might have seen her sing Lucia. I might have seen Joan Sutherland sing the mad scene from <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> – but I was new to opera then and my memory is fragmented.</p>			

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<p>My point is my experience of Joan Sutherland, is one of absences, longing and wondering, uncertainty, missing bits.</p> <p>Lucia has been forced to marry against her will. She goes on the wedding night, upstairs, and then she kills her husband. Then she returns to the party in her blood-stained wedding gown and she sings the mad scene.**</p>	<p>Dressing as Lucia</p> <p>In silence – Daniel dances</p> <p>Daniel falls</p>		<p>**The dance of light</p> <p>Q12: bedroom out – orange spot (downstage right up)</p> <p>Q12.1: red spot (upstage left)</p> <p>Q12.2: blue spot (upstage right)</p> <p>Q12.3: Profile (upstage left)</p> <p>Q12.4: yellow spot (downstage left)</p> <p>Q12.5: red spot (upstage right)</p> <p>Q12.6: profile (downstage right)</p> <p>Q12.7: stage centre spot</p> <p>Q13: bedroom</p>

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<p>You know the last time I saw Joan Sutherland she sang 'Home Sweet Home' the song at her farewell concert at Covent Garden – she was one of the guests at the party on New Year's Eve. A very famous 19th century Australian soprano called ... peach ... Nelly Melba sang it as her farewell performance too. Nelly melba is who Peach Melba is named after (It's a matter of great sadness to me that he Raspberry Sutherland never took off in quite the same way) And Joan wore this enormous green tulle dress, mountainous, it nearly buried her. And that frail old voice... and that makes me think about my mother, frail.</p> <p>I want t... but you know what, I'm not going to. I'm not going to tell you about the grotesque humiliations my mother has had to suffer under the burden of untreatable clinical anxiety. You see, at the heart of this piece – like any of the great operatic tragedies – an intractable moral or ethical dilemma. She would be mortified if she knew I was telling as much as I have already. I want to leave you with the happy memories of her but I need to talk about the disease. I've seen how it eats, and imprisons, and starves...</p>			

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<p>The way some people talk about anxiety you'd think it was something made up by Millennials, something that only afflicts the young. But it's not, and my mum is the kind of person who would deny there's such a thing as 'mental health' and 'talking cures'. I have young people come to me and say they have anxiety and there is a small part of me that thinks 'Oh god if you only knew' but mostly I think 'how terrible' how terrible to be so incapacitated at such a young age. You can be in a room with her and yet she feels so distant, she's right there but just out of reach.</p> <p>[Agitated] I'd like to get the government and the health service and the Internet and social media people and anyone who might be responsible and who might have a cure and just ...</p> <p>At the end of <i>Anna Bolena</i>, there is a moment where Anna is released from her madness – she has a moment of clarity, lucidity where she understands what is happening to her as she ascends the scaffold. Donizetti set this scene to the tune of Home Sweet Home and if I could wish one thing for my mother its that she might have that moment of respite, of release. Time to know that she is loved and admired.</p>		<p>[Interrupting as Daniel rants] Track 8: Anna Bolena (edit)</p>	

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<p>Joan Sutherland died in 2010. She erm.. had a fall. Broke both her legs and never recovered. The irony of a performer so adept at falling in her career, dying as a result of a fall – when I read that...</p> <p>But you know strictly speaking that wasn't the last time I saw her. Because I went to Australia. I went to the Sydney Opera House to see <i>The Pearl Fishers</i> conducted by Richard Bonyngue, her husband. And afterwards, I'm crossing the carpark and a little car pulls up and I look down and there's Joan Sutherland – just come to pick up her husband from work. That was the last time I saw her. Right there – but just out of reach. So simple. So ordinary. Not a diva or a goddess. A wife. A mother. So domestic."</p>	<p>Daniels bone dances as music plays</p> <p>Bows</p> <p>END</p>	<p>Track 9: Home Sweet Home</p> <p>Music ends</p>	<p>Q14: green wash</p> <p>Q15: fade to blackout</p> <p>Q16: bows</p>

Appendix 1: Lucia reviews – read on stage

Guardian: “A personal triumph for the Australian soprano Joan Sutherland - a future Melba, ... flawless singing ...”

“Her voice, intrinsically beautiful, was under the strictest control, the ornaments evenly delivered, nothing shirked, and the entire shaping of the scene put to the most dramatic effect.”

Financial Times: “The great soprano that her admirers have always felt she would be was now conclusively revealed ...Her decorations were tastefully and justly conceived, and beautifully executed. Arpeggios were delicate and lovely, trills were confident... a singer who can make florid decorative bursts in thirds heart-rending in effect, has understood the secret of Donizetti’s music.”

Sunday Times: “Her performance was all of a piece, musically exquisite, dramatically veracious and intense. The vocalisation is brilliant... Marvellously accomplished... Spell-binding... There were phrases that burnt themselves on the memory”

Appendix 2: Roy’s review of *Mad Scene*

Daniel Somerville’s *Mad Scene* is built on evocative imagery.

A dapper Somerville appears with shirt splattered red, sidling forward wanly like a recently shot duck. With a theatrical flourish, he sweeps back curtains to reveal our cast of characters: a corpse bride in diaphanous white with crimson lips; a white-faced man in a singlet, part pierrot, part ghostly b-boy; a wild dark-haired woman who flings about her bouquet and veil.

Shame about the action then: having set up the imagery brilliantly, the choreography itself serves mostly to fill out the swooning strains and quivering coloratura of its operatic score.

Appendix 3: More info on methodology

I used Butoh-fu (poetic images) to capture the sense of a movement. For example, this sweeping gesture of the arm might be imagined as candy-floss emanating from my palms, creating arcs of sweet sticky candy floss that I then walk through; or car headlamps in my palms, opening up the auditorium and drawing attention to my heart [Daniel gestures outward and then close to his chest]. Or this one, a stick in the palm of my hand, driving into the floor.

Appendix 4: Expanding on class

You see some people assume that because I like opera, I must be terrible middle class but actually that isn't my background. We had very little. But my parents were very aspirational. I was told not to speak like my peers. It was hard to make friends at school. And when I started going to the opera, I didn't feel class equipped to fit in there either – until I met the opera queens – and here I found my home, where class didn't matter, only a shared love of opera.