When Angels Speak, The Cerrado, A Star is Born

Beatrice Esteve

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When Angels Speak

We are back in Zürich for our Summer “séjour”. Landing two days before my birthday, giving us enough time to celebrate that day which fell on a Saturday, at Buech im Herrliberg. Up in the foothills at the further tip of the lake. A favorite, special place and it is always festive when we go there. This year the day dawned foggy and overcast but mysterious and profoundly beautiful just the same. Wet fields. Old barns. Cow bells. People empty.

A few days later and we zip off to Venice for the yearly Save Venice Board meeting. A busy, full schedule and even though it is a Biennale year we have no free time to visit as we do not want to stay longer, needing to go to Madrid a few days following on that for the gathering of the Teatro Real International Council. We see enough beauty and art as it is, especially delighting in the almost entirely restored Church of San Sebastiano. What a marvel that has become once again. What a genius Veronese, to have conceived of beauty on such a colossal scale and being able to actually execute it. The church is resplendent resembling a collection of precious gems of exquisite color and rare beauty. Everything is luminous in and out as the outside has also been restored and renovated and the marble columns have recovered a brilliant sheen of their own.

From San Sebastiano we take boats to the Ghetto. Save Venice is seriously
thinking of committing itself towards restoring one of the five remaining Renaissance synagogues in the Ghetto. Israeli philanthropist David Landau is spearheading a project to restore three such synagogues as well as the Jewish Museum and approached Save Venice inviting us to join in the undertaking. Save Venice is interested as once finished with San Sebastiano we will be ready to look at one more major restoration project and this would fit. We are received by David Landau who gives us a very complete and instructive presentation of the project.

We are then taken in to see the three synagogues. A warren of corridors and narrow passages leading from one house into another. Tiny, tiny rooms. When five thousand people at its hey day lived there, ten to twelve people would be squished into these cubicles. Hot in Summer, cold in Winter. No light. No air. Wretched. Up, up, up and up. We step carefully, gingerly. All the way to the very top where the synagogues were placed as they thus are nearer to the light, real and metaphorical and thus closer to God.

Listen.
We visit first the Italian synagogue (1570) which is the one we are considering. This is rather austere in its beauty as it is entirely made of dark wood but no gilding and or other decorations such as faux marble which was lavishly used in the German synagogue which we next visit. Where the Italian is sober and serious the German is rich and luxurious although the Jews were not allowed to use real marble. We learn that the beautifully executed faux marbles are more valuable today than the real. Everything is gilded with gold and scintillating. The lattice work along the separation in the women’s galleries are also exquisite carvings and all in all one can easily see that the German community was certainly the wealthiest there. Ironmongers when they first come to Venice end fifteenth century, David Landau tells us they could not pronounce the soft “J” sound of the Italian word “getto” (“getto”) for iron foundry where they worked and thus it became known as Ghetto with a hard germanic “G” and an “H”. Thus the word is pronounced ever after. A most interesting visit and next day at the meeting the project is indeed adopted. As is the project to “save” the ancient church of Torcello (1009 a.d.) where Venice had its origins and where the bricks, one thousand years later, are beginning to crumble and the church with its magnificent mosaic floors and other art works is seriously threatened by total disintegration.

Additional splendor is viewing the recently restored and finished Saint Ursula Cycle by Carpaccio in the Accademia and Leonardo drawings right next door. How powerful are these finely drawn pen and ink designs. Especially of common folk which have often been denominated
“groteschi” but in my view are not grotesques at all. Rather, Leonardo was just sketching people as he actually saw them. Aging, weathered, rough, plain folk. Peasant folk. Certainly no lords and ladies these and as they aged, the features sunken and angles accentuated, the jaws forward jutting; grotesque they did indeed become. If you look closely at people on the streets of Venice today who are NOT tourists (and these you must seek) you will see their descendants..... looking exactly alike. No, not grotesque. People. Totally different from Saint Ursula which is peopled with gorgeous noble ladies, lords, brave soldiers, buildings exuding wealth and importance.

Back to Zürich we fly where next day Christina informs us there will be one more concert in the Fraumünster Kirche (which houses three glorious Chagall glass murals) from the Chagall Concerts Series organized by his grand daughter Meret Meyer together with the Pastor Niklaus Peter. Having heard two out of three such concerts from last year’s series and having been bowled over by the beauty and originality of those performances I do not want to miss this one. We missed the first, not having been in Zürich and would miss the third having to be in Madrid. Christina had never been to any and what with my enthusiasm, needed no prodding to join us even though she had a dinner party immediately after.

The theme of this concert is: “What angels have to tell me”. I am ready to be enchanted as last year, upon coming, for the first time I discovered that besides being a marvellous, unique artist Chagall was an equally gifted, brilliant poet. His poetry complements his work and the two walk hand in hand. Meret, who handles the legacy of his printed work is a very sensitive editor, knows her grandfather’s work inside out and is thus able to make the finest of selections. Likewise of the music that will accompany the theme and topics of the paintings chosen, as well as the writing.

It is late afternoon/early evening when we arrive and lots of people are milling outside the church door enjoying the soft, late afternoon light. In a little group I see Meret and Reverend Niklaus chatting with some people. I hesitate not. Step over to greet them and to tell them how enthused I am about this wonderful project of theirs. That Pepe and I live in Brazil but do come a lot to Zürich and won’t miss a concert if we can help it.

Contrary to my custom I start reading the program immediately as I want to be versed in the poetry before the performance beings. Tonight it will be organ music executed by chief organist Hansjörg Albrecht, a mezzo
soprano, Lioba Braun, singing and a Contemporary Dance ZhdK Group complementing. Chief choreographer, a young Brazilian called Davidson Hagglin Farias. How appropriate: “David’s Son” “hagglin”, shaping. Molding. This is Zürich.

The magic unfolds on the very first page.
A photo of a thirty something looking Chagall, piercing eyes, sitting in front of one of his paintings placed upside down, as I guess art must be placed so as to converse with angels. In San Sebastiano Veronese likewise, upside down on his scaffolding, hears.

“Si toute vie va inévitablement vers sa fin, nous devons, durant la nôtre, la colorier avec nos couleurs d’amour et d’espoir.”

Meret begins softly to read as light filters into the church and the murals are on fire.

A young Chagall musing.
Here I am amongst ordinary folk, workers, tradespeople. In public places having only the four seasons as neighbors. What is left me to do? Stretch out on my little cot in my square room and think about…what? It is dark and I am alone.

Dreams take hold of me. Suddenly the ceiling opens up and a winged figure descends making a huge racket filling the room with movement and clouds. A to and fro-ing of wings.
I think: It has to be an angel! I cannot open my eyes for all is too bright, too luminous. Having examined every corner the winged creature departs through the same opening in the ceiling taking along the light and blue air.
It is dark once again. I awaken.
My painting: The Apparition evokes this dream.


The organ crashes into sound. This is music triumphant.
Lioba sings and we are transported.
Far, far away. Vitebsk.
Hardly is it over and the organ inundates the entire space some more. Powerful. Overwhelming.
Listen. Listen. Listen.
It is not given us every day to see and hear angels……
Toccata in D major by Vierne. Last movement of his Organ Symphony #1.
We can barely breathe.

A tiny little break.
Meret, ever so softly;
“I live my life”…..

Chagall writes:
I have hidden my love
in my paintings.
I live my life
like a tree the forest.

I paint my love
in my paintings.
Angels see this love
as do brides that never ascended
the wedding canopy.

The fragrance of a flower
lights candles.
The day of my birth
rises in blue.

I see myself immobile
and walking at the same time.
I dissolve
into fire coming from the world.
My love is like water
sprinkled on all four corners.

Behind me follow my paintings.

Gustav Mahler takes heed, steps in and we hear: Two songs from Symphony #3.
For mezzo soprano and organ.
“Oh, man! Take care! ( O Mensch! Gib acht!)
Three angels sang a sweetest song”.....
( Es sungen drei Engel ein’n süßen Gesang)

Our organ softens and we sink into reverie and love.

Meret again. Almost matter of factly. “In 1931”....

In 1931 Chagall accepts an invitation from the mayor of Tel Aviv, Meir Dizengoff. Arrives and is bowled over.

I feel I am seeing with my soul, as if I had been born just the day before and in one short jump I left my beloved Vitebsk and find myself in Bible lands.
Amongst the rocks and caves of this brown earth I suddenly see and recognize prophets, beside me. Vitebsk seems to release itself from me and fades further and further away into air and I begin to learn a new understanding of the world, a context that the world does not want to recognize. Rembrandt illustrated the Bible in Holland, painting from the street where lived the jews. Is there an artist who has not been influenced by the Bible? Here I see my ancestors for the very first time and it seemed to me that my color was their color, that my faces their faces. These lines I paint are the lines of their faces.

Maurice Durufle ( 1902 1986) gives us “Veni creator spiritus” for organ and chorus and we stride confidently and lightly through the hills of Judea and Samaria..
The dance group takes over clad in the colors of the land, the rocks, the caves. They bend, they stretch, they entice, they yield. Brown, black, the earth.

Five songs to end it all.
Max Reger ( 1873-1916)
Modesty
Luck
A Child’s Prayer
Out of the Eyes of Heaven
My Dream

Thus angels speak
and I hear the old house on the Santo Antonio da Barra Hill
in Bahia
Releasing me once again. As does Vitebsk.
Let go.
It is all right.
See, the three centennial mango trees are gone….
as is the avocado out in the back yard…
The house lies bare…revealed.
It is all right.

When Angels Speak
glory abounds.

Beatrice Esteve Zürich June 27, 2019

ADDENDUM

Here are the texts that were used for this concert. Poetry and prose.

“Dans ces coins en commun”….

Dans ces coins en commun, avec des ouvriers et des marchands des
 quatre saisons pour
voisins il ne me restait qu’à m’allonger au bord de mon lit et à
réfléchir sur moi- même.
À quoi encore? Et les rêves m’accablaient. Une chambre carrée, vide. Dans un
angle, un seul lit et moi dessus.
Il fait sombre.
Soudain le plafond s’ouvre et un être ailé
descend ave éclat et fracas
emplissant la chambre de
de mouvement et des nuages.
Un frou-frou d’ailes trainées.
Je pense: un ange! Je ne peux pas ouvrir les yeux. Il fait trop clair, trop lumineux.
Après avoir fureté partout il se lève et
passe devant la fente du plafond,
emportant avec lui toute la lumière et
l ‘air bleu.

De nouveau il fit sombre. Je me reveille.
Mon tableau “L’Apparition” évoque ce rêve.
“J’habite ma vie”....
1960-1965

Dans mes tableaux
J’ai caché mon amour
J’habite ma vie
Comme l’arbre la forêt.

Qui entend ma voix
Qu’aperçoit mon visage
Enfoui dans la lumière de la lune
Comme un mort d’il ya mille ans
Ma mère m’a fait un don
Il rayonne dans mon corps
Je n’ouvre pas la bouche
Pour que mon coeur ne se sauve
Et ne pas me lamenter
Comme un oiseau dans la nuit.

Dans mes tableaux
J’ai peint mon amour
Les anges le voient
Et les fiancées qui ne sont pas allées
Vers le dais de mariage.

Le parfum d’une fleur
Allume les bougies
En bleu se lève
Le jour de ma naissance

Mes rêves, je les ai cachés
Sur les nuages
Mes soupirs
Volent vers les oiseaux

Je me vois immobile et en marche
Je me défais
Devant le feu que vient du monde
Mon amour est comme de l eau dispersée
Aux quatre coins
Derrière moi vont mes tableaux  
( Génève 1975)

“En 1931”…

En 1931, J’acceptais l’invitation de Meir Dizengoff, le maire de Tel Aviv, et j’eus l’impression de voir avec les yeux de l’âme, d’être né la veille et de m’être déplacé d’un bond de Vitebsk en terre biblique.

Parmi les rochers et les grottes, dans cet air, sur le fond de ce paysage, je reconnaisais et voyais les prophètes près de moi. Vitebsk se détacha de moi de plus en plus, s’éloigna dans l’air, et il me sembla apprendre un nouveau contenu de ce monde, ce contenu que le monde ne veut reconnaître. Rembrandt avait illustré la Bible en Hollande, dans la rue juive de sa ville. Et quel artiste ne s’était pas inspiré de la Bible? Mais moi, je voyais mes ancêtres par la première fois, et il me sembla que ma couleur était leur couleur, que mes visages étaient leurs visages. Ces traits étaient ceux de leurs visages.

À première vue, ce que j’ai découvert en terre biblique peut sembler insignifiant.
Bien que ce livre circule dans le monde en millions d’exemplaires, le rêve qu’il renferme est comme sous clé, englouti dans les larmes millénaires. Il promet une autre liberté, un autre sens de la vie.
Peu à peu je perdais mon ancien ancrage local et j’errais sur la terre comme lavé. Si auparavant, je n’avais fait que verser des larmes sur ma lointaine Vitebsk, si elle me semblait, étrangère à présent par contre mon horizon s’était élargi, et je marchais sur le cime dumont Blanc d’une autre planète du coeur. J’étais loin. De qui, de quoi?
N’était-ce pas de moi-même? Il est rare que l’art m’offre une joie si profonde.
Comme si j’avais mis la main, par hasard dans la main d’un vieillard, d’un prophète.
The Cerrado

Ever since I went off with Pepe last Friday to the Mato Grosso, deep into the heartlands of Brazil, the Cerrado; (Scrublands) it feels as if I haven’t quite come back. Pepe and I had been in Switzerland for a good six weeks. Barely do we return, of a Wednesday and I am told I needs must accompany Pepe to Mato Grosso where the Brazilian Cotton Association (ANEA) would be holding its annual gathering. They were going to celebrate the 100 years of the São Paulo Commodity Exchange and Pepe, as the Exchange’s oldest Ex-President would be likewise remembered. He has been an active member for 70 years.

I had never been to that part of the Cerrado and after flying for two hours over extensively cultivated plots of land laid out side by side for what seems to stretch on forever…..we land in the capital city Cuiabá. What used to be a frontier town is now the capital of the greatest agricultural rich area in Brazil. Cotton, soybeans, cattle. New money. New town. Driving through from the airport to the so called highway leading out to this resort hotel where the meeting would take place we are struck by what is an unbelievable, shocking, eyesore. Mega store outlets standing next to each other, one definitively outdoing the other. Dilapidated run down little businesses that actually do have a worn charm of their own. Pharmacies, tyre sellers, car repair shops, petrol stations, bars. Everything rather seedy looking and run down. Road construction which means interrupted lanes, covered in dust and naturally one pot hole after another. Dust. Dust. Dust.

Out there somewhere beyond lies the Chapada dos Guimarães….a scrubland plateau, eerily beautiful with its singular scrubland vegetation, (I am told) bird and animal life, rivers, lakes and most exquisite of all the magical aura, all pervading and from which one does not escape…of the Cerrado. Superstitious or not; it casts a spell.

We are channelled into this ancient rattle bang bang old bus and away we go. Takes us forty minutes just to get through what is only a few miles
in distance and finally we are on the highway. Highway? Bumpitty, bumpitty, bump, bump. There is not one foot of smooth surface and everywhere signs advising us that the road is being duplicated. Would never guess.

The air conditioner is on full blast as it is torrid outside. Afternoon is fast fading and soon we are frozen in this old rattle trap and no way of reducing the frigid air.

Two hours later we tumble out. We have arrived. The Malai Manso (Manso is the name of the lake and means tame). Malai I gather is the chain that runs it. Or not. (I surmise.)

Built by the present Minister of Agriculture and THE biggest soybean planter in Brazil, Blairo Maggi. This is Soviet Realism construction at its resuscitated best; cement structures highlighted and improved with visible metal/aluminum pipes and tubing and a colossal Gone with the Wind staircase leading down from the hallway where you enter, to a leveled terrace surface in front of this outsized pool which naturally is encircled by everything that modern day pools need: chairs, plastic umbrellas, bars. (several) Beside the pool, in the pool, over the pool.

Sound. Sound that ever present necessity, already reaching up to us. Our room albeit led by a charming young man who is also “new” to the establishment and went to the right rather than to the left, where the odd numbers are……hence our room; at the furthest end of a mile like tubular, in and out snaking corridor. Back we track. The lights along the way get lit by sensors, which mostly do not “sense” us so we have to flail our arms in front of the reader in the pitch dark as by now night has fallen. Can you hear Pepe, rumbling, all the way to New York? To Zürich? I am sure you can.

We freshen up and “sense” our steps all the way back for the Welcoming Cocktail which is in full swing. These many cotton growers, traders, brokers, spinners gathered from all over the world. Esteve is naturally very well represented and I am immediately introduced by Richard from the Singapore office to a delightful young spinner from Pakistan; Maqbool Baig. The biggest manufacturer of cotton socks in the world; Adidas, Puma etc etc. You name it. Instantly I am having a real conversation and am also invited to be “hand carried” to Pakistan. Maqbool’s young wife is a professor of English literature and so we share more topics of interest. Rarified indeed is the astonishing Cerrado atmosphere and already I get a first taste, via Pakistan.
We step out under Gone with the Wind staircase. Introductions and welcoming speeches are being made. Speaks the Minister. Stands beside us. Pepe goes over to him (led by me of course as see the man, he does not) Says hello to the Minister who immediately says: Why Don Pepe da Esteve! So Don Pepe smiles all over and I smile too. Cerrado mysteries making themselves felt. How very little it takes to make a man happy. Had there been any traces of tiredness these are instantly dissolved. Into the atmosphere. Truly amazing for a 92 year old.

The entertainment then begins in earnest. Young musicians and a numerous youth chorus are assembled and begin performing. Wonderful really in this far away from everywhere, place....but then...oi weh......we NEED amplification. Simple hearing is not enough. All around us are infernal sound boxes. We flee to the furthest point. There is no respite. I stuff my ears with kleenex and still my ears are spinning. We find a settee and at least sit down, under the stars which we can make out somewhat as naturally the lighting needs also be excessive across the grounds leading towards the lake....

Despite it all there is a something to the air, to the night, to the atmosphere. A strangeness, a palpable mystery which is enticing. A magical feeling....

A promise suspended. I am dying to see and feel it in daylight.

A young woman in white emerges from the semi gloom as that particular part of the terrace for no fathomable reason is totally in the dark. Introduces herself as being from the Ministry of Agriculture in Brasilia. Hears Pepe’s Portuñol and says she too is Spanish by descent and fluent indeed. An Isabel is she and charmed by Don Pepe and he by her and under the Cerrado night sky Pepe has a most delightful time albeit he sees her not. “Promise to poke me tomorrow when you see me” he says to her as we set off for bed, “as I shall certainly not see you and do not wish to be rude.”

We are off to a good start.

I leave the window open the better to feel the strangeness in the air. Cool too as the night advances.

Dawn. I jump up and step out on our little terrace. The world is silent. The softest of colors and what at night had been invisible, now stands out
at the furthest tip of this smooth, smooth lake: the hills of the Chapada dos Guimarães. A sharp outline along the lake’s edge. Cutting through the ether. The world has not awakened yet but down by the lake, in stately, slow steps I see a Cerrado ostrich making its ungainly way up towards us. The ostrich, the lake, the Cerrado, myself. Twenty minutes later and all has dissolved. The spell breaks. The light has changed and already one begins to feel the heat that will soon become omnipresent. Oblivious is this ostrich to the reality around it. I look at that and am appalled. A collection of “guest houses” sprinkled about. Wrong word. More like military, defensive bunkers. Stark is the word. No windows. Out of grey cement or possibly concrete. At odd angles to each other. No, no this cannot be......To soften the blow, palm trees have been planted....which do not do well at all. Scraggly, shriveled, sorry looking in the constant, torrid drought.

“A palm tree rises in Rusafa.
Born in the West, far from the land of palms.
I say to it: How like myself you are, far away and in exile.
In long separation from family and friends.
You were born in a lands in which you are a stranger,
And you like me, are far from home.”

(Abd al Rahman Umayyad prince after fleeing to Cordoba when his family was murdered by the Abbasids in Damascus 750 A.D. Córdoba where he created a new Rusafa .... and planted palm trees.

All wrong. Everything is wrong. Still there is fascination. Mesmerizing. Ostrich plods along, levitating almost whilst I look for Rommel, the Africa Korps...

After breakfast I hand Pepe over to one of the many Esteve representatives as I am dying to step out, to explore. They will take care of him and sit with him during the morning session.

I set off. It is still only 10 a.m. but I am hit by a wall. The heat is all enveloping. All around is dry, dry, dry. An attempt at planting grass is a disaster as all is singed and burnt. I wander down to the lake. Brilliant it lies, still, in the strong light. Mirror still, it reflects the sky and yes, even the air. Unreal, surreal. One is transported.
A fake sand beach almost kills the effect and so I look away at the distant hills.

Like it or not there appears a pier and like it or not some more; mega boats lie anchored, idly awaiting a guest or two, to go roaring off to the furthest point of that dreamy, silent lake. Wrong, all wrong. I seek an Indian, a canoe, a silent paddle.

I turn right towards a lengthy wooden medieval (!) looking drawbridge, spanning the tip of the lake towards some woodsly hills at the other end. I look for knights in armor. Why not, in this Cerrado? I walk slowly as the air weighs a ton and there is not a whisper of wind. There are road signs indicating different holes on the golf course. I follow a sign and pass by more bunker/house constructions. Some scraggily trees and lo and behold I do end up by some fairway and a green, much the worse for the drought and heat. Oh, dear. Some of the participants will be playing golf later, starting at noon! Suicidal.

I have seen enough and head back seeking a little clump of trees and perhaps some coolness. There is shade and suddenly ever so softly I hear a voice from above: “Won’t you join me for some tree walking? It is perfectly safe”. Startled I look up and see this red helmeted apparition stuck inside some branches.” Thank you, no.” “You need not fear. It is fun to walk on trees.”

On water, I have heard…..

I reclaim Pepe who too has had enough of “cotton talk” and is ready for a break despite the charming Isabel who did find him once more and announce herself. I had noticed a hotel souvenir bunker/store selling Indian artifacts and handicraft including some wonderful hammocks made from hand cultivated and harvested cotton and also from the “buriti” vine. After lunch we return to pick them up. The salesperson is a well meaning elderly lady who talks and talks and talks. How long does it take to put two hammocks into a plastic bag each and bind it down with scotch tape….whilst one lady talks non stop? Time enough to shatter the stillness. To escape the barrage (Montgomery at Alamein?) I seat Pepe outside in the shade of five tortured palm trees and we wait….

A slight, slight breeze has come up by the lake and the surface has burst into movement and is all ripples and swells. Glittering in the rarified air. Beautiful.

The atmosphere around us though, still stultified. One and a half hours later, in talk and heat induced coma, we stagger back to our room, clutching our hammocks. In one short day two lessons have I learned: time in the Cerrado moves at a different pace and images are not what
they seem. Never has “siesta” sounded more welcome. The world outside (the lake breeze gone) still bakes and even I, for once, am thankful for the air conditioning.

Comes the reception.

Tables are beautifully set up with tufts of cotton on dried Cerrado twigs. Languid cotton lined lanterns hang from the ceiling and softness is added to the stark, colossal space. There are speeches, thank you’s etc.

Pepe is next.

He had of course been advised that he would be “surprised” by being remembered. His little speech is ready. He had delivered it quite a few times to me at home and while we waited for the hammocks that afternoon and I was hoping that he would do as well, come the moment. Since he cannot see and hears poorly he had asked for a light in case he needed to peek at his “promptings”. How? I asked myself if he really doesn’t see…… naturally there was no such lamp around.

Fazed he is not at all and promptly delivers a wonderful little talk, off the cuff, very spontaneously. In five minutes he re-tells the story of the Commodity Exchange, names the presidents. Adds a few anecdotes and ends with a great great great how many times great? grandfather Esteve who began in cotton in 1849. A spinner in Barcelona, employing women who spun cotton at home. Cottage industry. Pepe adds he must have speculated somewhat because soon he was trading in cotton in Savannah, Georgia and spinning is forgotten. From there, out into the world and something they must surely be doing right as Esteve are to this day dealing in cotton as a family business.

Ends very seriously by reminding all that since medicine is so advanced nowadays and we live longer and longer, HE intends to be around for the 200th meeting of the São Paulo Commodity Exchange and invites all who wish to join him to come too.

See you then.

No doubt Pepe will.
Mystery and magic.
Ether and air.
Atmosphere. Stratosphere.
Rarified. Suspended.
Spooks and spells.
Real. Surreal.

In the Cerrado, 2017.
“With a caravan of cloths I left Sistan
with cloths spun from the heart, woven from the soul.
cloths made of a silk that is called Word.
cloths designed by an artist who is called Tongue
every stitch was torn by force from the breast
every weft separated in torment from the heart.
These are not woven cloths like any cloth
do not judge them in the same way as others....
This is no cloth that can be spoilt by water.
this is no cloth that can be damaged by fire.
it’s color is not destroyed by the earth’s dust
nor its design effaced by the passing of time.”

Farukkhi (Persian poet) Died circa 1037

In 1907 my paternal grandfather Hermann Koechli comes from
Switzerland to Brazil. Together with his partner a Mr. Kühni they will
set up a business to distribute and sell cotton cloth throughout the
Northeastern states. In 1916 my father is born in Maceió, Alagoas. As
a young adult in 1938 he also begins his working life in his father’s
company selling cloth in the Northeast.

Beatrice Esteve
São Paulo, July 28, 2017

ADDENDUM I

Bumpitty, bumpitty, bump, bump.
Back to Cuiabá next morning.
Home we fly.
Through the cosmos.
Down to Earth.
Chapter 1. New York, September 2009

Pepe and I are in New York. We had arrived on the weekend to attend the opening night of the opera season. On Monday, September 21st the Metropolitan Opera would be presenting a new production of TOSCA with Karita Mattila in the title role. The difficult task of replacing the well loved but now twenty year aged Franco Zeffirelli production had fallen to Swiss producer Luc Bondy. Not an easy task. The atmosphere was expectant, hesitant, anxious and why not say it; slightly belligerent.

We had invited dear friends Cida Fontana and Bruce Horten to join us at the dinner following the performance.

I had never been to a Met opening and was really looking forwards to the evening.

Opera over we all troop out to neighboring Damrosch Park where a huge tent had been mounted. The atmosphere was festive but also laden and heavy as hardly had the last strains of music died down when a largish and vocal group began booing lustily and loudly. Barely containing their glee at being able to voice their frustration and willing to simply hate DQWKLQJWKDWGDUHGUHSODFHWKHLUEHORYHG=HÀUHOOLSURGXFWLRQKDGIDOOHQ\VXSHFWLYH726&$

As for me I LIKED Bondy´s reading. I loved the First Act with its bare, stark representation of the church. I liked his modern Alex Katz like like rendering of the Madonna and above all I thought he was brilliant in his second scene gaudy representation of a perfect Joãozinho Trinta like Rio Carnaval Samba School display of a procession. Scarpia was perfect. This evil, cruel, decadent, man grovelling as he lusted visibly after the Virgin on her pedestal. The ONLY woman he would NEVER possess. Vile, degenerate horror.

The Second Act taking place in Scarpia´s study, Palazzo Farnese. Again not in the opulent, luxurious "salon". Instead in the entrails of the palace. Shabby, sordid little den, near the torture chamber. As to the cheap little prostitutes scampering pathetically about. Which "nouveau arrived" , all powerful Chief of Police cum Dictator, be he South American or otherwise, doesn’t have his "coterie" of floozies, if only to despise and display, to his even shabbier underlings?

To me the only unlikely note of the opera was Cavaradossi sleeping soundly and well, up stage, the night before his execution. Hardly. A lot of "pro-ing" and "con-ing" during dinner. Cory Toevs waves at us
two tables across. "We MUST talk". Gushing.
"Do you know a young Brazilian tenor called Atalla Ayan? Jimmy Levine is enchanted". No.
She continues.
Jimmy auditioned him last Friday and is so excited he is not letting him return to Brazil. He is keeping him right here at the Met studying at the Lindemann Young Artists Program.
BUT we need the money to cover costs for this year. Can you help?"

We arranged to have lunch a few days later with Atalla, Brian Zeger who is responsible for the Program, Tia Chapman and Marita Altman, dear friends who also work at the Met in Major Gifts. (fund raising)
Pepe and I arrive early at P.J. Clarke’s right across from the Met and an easy access for all our working Met friends. Brian Zeger arrives soon after and tells us his story.
At the end of August Bruce Zemsky who is an opera singer agent and also a friend of Brians’s was in Bologna watching an opera. The tenor was Atalla. Bruce had heard him the year before in Belém and realized immediately that there stood talent. Atalla had gotten a scholarship to spend a few months in Bologna that Summer. Bruce is swept off his feet. He can hardly hold back. Opera over, he rushes to his phone. Calls James Levine and says:
"You must hear this young man".
Atalla is flown to New York. Everybody at the Met is in feverish activity frantically preparing for opening night. The only available free moment was Friday morning, September 18, Rosh Hashannah day.
"There we all were", says Brian. "Six members of the Panel. All of us Jewish. The only non-Jewish member, Sally Billinghurst was at home preparing the Rosh Hashannah meal for her Jewish husband." Laughter.
The audition took place on the Met stage. Huge and empty. Atalla begins to sing. James Levine is all attention. After a while he turns to his colleagues and says:
"Pay attention. A voice like his we get to hear once every hundred years. He is the Pavarotti of the XXist cent. and he is not going back to Brazil"
The only problem was that Levine had already filled the quota for this year’s Lindemann Program and there was no additional money available for an extra student. I ask Brian what the amount was: U. S. $45,000.00 of which twenty thousand by October 15th! Next year the Met would pay. I tell Brian that Pepe and I would start a fund with U.S $5,000.00. I was SUPREMELY confident that I would find eight more friends, Brazilian or otherwise who would be delighted to help.
Atalla, Tia and Marita arrive, the three together and we had a very lively, happy luncheon. This lovely young man with an immensely warm smile, liquid brown eyes and above all a pervading gentleness. Two weeks short of twenty four. Speaking his first words in English, shyly. Pepe and I would be leaving for Switzerland next day for one more "Lausanne nephew," Marcos`, wedding. Fired, I became a woman with a mission.

First I stalked two of Marcos` brothers-in-law, both living in Switzerland. Breckenridge Knapp, American from Houston. One of my favourite people. Gentle, soft spoken with a huge heart. He came on board instantly. Encouraged I tackled Pascal Nicod. Renowned surgeon, Director of the Lausanne Hospital. A very fine violinist himself. He is also a collector of Stardivari and Guarnieris. A philanthropist he lends these precious instruments unstintingly to promising young soloists without a time frame. I felt very confident that I could sway him. "Yes," he says," Write, when you get home".

Enthused I approached Eliane Castro and Paulo Gala.Friends from São Paulo, ardent music lovers and generous sponsors. Paulo is also a serious amateur pianist. I spill my story. Paulo is Portuguese and as such has a very fine, self deprecating sense of humor: With his marked Portuguese accent he rolls out all his "rrrs". "Prrrimeirrro é prrreciso terrr, parrrra poderrr darrrr" (First you need to have it before you can give it"

I rrroll rrright back:
"You not only have it, you can give it." Eliane, laughingly: "Of course we are going to give it." Paulo with a resigned shrug: "Oh well, if my wife says "yes", who am I to say no". Who indeed!

So I had the twenty thousand I needed before October 15th. Three days later we flew back home via New York.

At the airport we meet Edemir Pinto. He is the new President of the recently gone-public São Paulo Commodity Exchange. Pepe sat on this Board for a good fifteen years. A self-made man of humble origins Edemir knows about hard work and effort. I tell him Atalla` s story. This kid born in Belém do Pará from a very humble background. A daily struggle for his mother to make ends meet. Already as a child he loved to sing. With no means to pay for lessons he teaches himself by listening to Pavarotti on the internet. In 2002 he is finally able to enter the Music Conservatory in Belém. He has the great
good fortune to be taught by Malina Mileva. She is a Bulgarian Mezzo-
soprano who came to Brazil when the Wall came down. She immediately
identified his singular talent and beautiful voice and taught him lovingly
and well. Soon he was singing in the yearly Opera Festival in Belém. In
2008 he sings Rodolfo in La Boheme. Atalla is heard by an Italian from the
Bologna Opera who is bowled over. This Italian invites Atalla to study
in Bologna for a few months in the Summer of 2009. This is where Bruce
Zemsky hears him and gets him to Levine.
Edemir’s eyes moisten. His voice thickens.
"I will give you US $10,000.00 towards Atalla´s education." I jump with
joy.

During that first encounter at our September luncheon, curious, I asked
Atalla about his Middle-Eastern sounding name. I had always known
that there had been a lot of travelling sales people, (peddlers) migrating
to the Amazon region (early XXth century) of Jewish, Lebanese, Syrian,
Turkish origins. Swirling, hot desert sands blending naturally with cool,
glistening, silken skin....

With his huge smile he states quite simply:
"I don’t know. I think my grand-father was Syrian..."

I dropped the subject. Atalla was raised by his step father whom he called
Uncle Ibrahim.

There is a well-known Amazonian legend about the Pink Dolphin It
belongs to Amazon Indian folklore. Everybody knows the story. Whoever
visits the Amazon is told about the beautiful Pink Dolphin. Not only is
he gorgeous, he also knows how to sing. With his melodious voice he
enchants virginal, young Indian maidens who are lured and seduced by
his irresistible beauty and song. Soon they are frolicking happily in the
depth, mysterious murky waters of the great rivers: Amazonas, Negro
and tributaries. Elated but exhausted the girls eventually step out of the
waters; maidens no longer. The dolphin disappears. Gone forever, the
maidens wait in vain for his return. Lamenting their loss they mourn
along the river banks. The dolphin will only be heard again by other
damsels.
Nine months later, invariably a little star is born. These stars take their
place in the heavenly canopy. Myriad, pointilist dots. Some will twinkle
brightly. Some twinkle faintly. Some sink unnoticed on the horizon. Some,
a very few: become “Magnas”.

If you venture forth today on a river boat, along all waters of the mighty
Amazon Basin AND if you are lucky, you too will see beautiful pink dolphins. You too will be enthralled by their beauty, their grace, their playfulness. You may even jump, if you dare, into the murky waters and frolic with them but try as hard as you might, YOU will never hear the Pink Dolphin’s song.

Back home I report to Brian, Tia and Marita. Am very happy as I have thirty thousand pledged. Gently they break the news: darling Breck Knapp has actually sent one thousand, not five. No matter. Any amount is welcome. As for "Monsiuer le Docteur,"...not one word...I write. Silence. Oh well, sometimes people forget.

So I get to work in São Paulo. Two phone calls and two instant successes. Manoel Felix Cintra, incredulous.

Jorge Paulo Lemann, likewise. Big philanthropist but not in the field of music. I try anyway. He writes: "Great story. Count me in."

Roberto Teixeira da Costa adds one more thousand. I stand at US $32,000.00 and feel flushed with success.

Tia from New York writes:
"There is some Brazilian gentleman friend of one of our International Council Members who seemingly wants to give twenty five thousand!"

How wonderful. I relax and look forwards to going back to New York a few weeks later for our yearly Met International Council meeting. We are busy in our swirl of opera going, parties, visits.

"Tia" I ask "did we get those twenty five?"

"No."

Among our International Council members there is an Israeli gentleman living in London. Zvi Meitar, with a very, lovely wife Ofra and charming daughter Dafna. He was standing off to one side, alone, as sometimes can happen in big gatherings. I decide to go over and talk to him. About Brazil, art, books. I talk about Atalla. At that point I knew nothing about Zvi, his life, what he does or doesn’t do.

I get very emotional when I talk about Atalla. By now Dafna joins us, all ears.

I tell them that what I have loved the most about fundraising for Atalla’s education is that so far everyone who gave, gave "from the heart". That I will not accept any money if it does not come from the heart. There is a purity to Atalla, almost an innocence and I simply would not have any strings attached to this giving. No hidden agendas, no tits for tats.

Dafna opens wide her eyes;
"But Bea you can’t refuse, if someone wants to give you money?" "I can
and I will "I reply "if it is not from the heart."
Zvi`s face lights up into THE biggest smile ever.
"I have LOVED your story" he says "and I will give you ten thousand dollars towards Atalla´s fund". Miss Big Mouth over here says:
"I’ll only accept if it is from the heart."
Bigger smile still.

"It IS from the heart".
So Zvi gets two kisses, one on each cheek.
Only later did I learn that Zvi not only is a big Met supporter, he also is a big sponsor of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra AND yearly pays the studies of fifteen young voice students!

Three to go.

Early December in São Paulo we gave a little Christmas Party. I tell the story to Ana Maria Igel. She was walking out, saying good-bye. I finish by saying:
"And now I only need three."
She completes the sentence:
"You need it no longer."

Atalla´s first year is covered.

Chapter II.

Early December Brian Zeger writes saying that Atalla was coming to Brazil for Christmas. He would be in Belém with his mother and extended family where he would also give a recital on December 29th. Early January he would have to come to São Paulo to get his student visa for the U.S.I told Brian he could stay with us. We also happen to live close by the Consulate. There was a major problem. A huge back up for visa requests. Sixteen thousand requests waiting to be granted. All because of a newly introduced stamp. The ink would not adhere to the paper. Waiting time, from three to four weeks. Could I help? Well, Pepe is a U.S. citizen and we are naturally friends of the Consul, Tom White and his charming wife Terry. So I called Tom and explained how important it was for Atalla to get back to school soonest. He came through with flying colours. Afterwards I learned that Atalla was among the top ten priorities when the Visas started being reissued. He got his before ex-President Fernando Henrique Cardoso who was also waiting!
I also told Brian that I thought it would be nice if Atalla gave a little recital
at home for friends and especially his wonderful supporters. Naturally we included Tom and Terry White. Since it was the height of Summer it would be out on the terrace. Afterwards Pepe would serve his famous "Paella" which he himself cooks. It was a glorious evening. Everybody excited and a festive spirit.

Pepe had "prohibited" me from telling Atalla´s story once again. Naturally I ignored him and told it just the same. Naturally Atalla sang divinely. Naturally everybody was enchanted. Naturally they could not believe their eyes and especially ears. So unspoiled. So fresh. So young. Moved, they all realized that they were hearing an extraordinarily beautiful voice. Pepe´s delicious "Paella" broke the spell and added Epicurean delight. When the party broke up Renata and Julio Landmann, Eduardo and Maria Sylvia Levy, Roberta Matarazzo, Ana Maria and Antonio Carlos Noronha all came forth and exuberantly started a new "Atalla Contingency Fund" for the year 2011. Marlis and Arnim Lore joined but not for the fund. A real "mother hen" Marlis gave Atalla cash: for a good, warm coat, boots, scarf, gloves, cap. Everything that he would be needing to survive a raw, cold New York Winter. This young man transplanted from the Equator to New York in mid-Winter.

Atalla got his Visa in five days! My staff lines up to say good-bye. They had gotten used to hearing Atalla practice every day. Shyly, radiantly they would stand around, listening. Awed.

Fátima, our cook:
"God bless you and keep you Atalla. May He preserve your voice and may you continue to bring joy and beauty to whomever hears you wherever you may go."
Tears.

Act III

Early June. Eliane Castro calls me from Rio. "You can`t imagine what happened!" I cannot. Every year Globo T.V. sponsors a major musical show in Rio on Copacabana Beach. The Projeto Aquarius. Until now it had been predominantly pop singers, Brazilian and even Madonna one year. This
year Globo decided to take a plunge. They would show opera singers presenting favorite, well known, beloved arias. Atalla Ayan was the chosen tenor. Eliane was invited and sat in one of Globo VIP boxes. Over one hundred thousand people milling joyously about on the sands of Copacabana. Cell phone lights flashing. Atalla sings. SENSATIONAL. The sands erupt.

Somewhere in the Amazonian waters a Pink Dolphin rejoices.

ADDENDUM:

December 31st Atalla will step for the first time in his life onto the stage of the Metropolitan Opera for an opera performance. A Gala evening. He will sing "Gastone" in the new La Traviata. Not the "Alfredo" part. Not yet. All of New York will be there. We´ll be there. Applauding and no doubt shedding a tiny little tear of joy.

Trancoso, June, 5, 2010

ADDENDUM to the ADDENDUM

Early July, 2010

Except that it wasn´t.... Early July Pepe and I went to New York and as usual had lunch with Tia Chapman to catch up on Met news. I told her how Atalla was having these recitals in Brazil (which we would miss) and how we were all getting excited about the "Gastone" in the upcoming Traviata.
"There will be no Gastone, Bea and what is even worse, Atalla is not coming back to the Met for his second year at the Lindemmann Programme in September." says Tia. I almost fell of my chair. Speechless. Whatever happened? The oddest, implausible story concocted by Atalla’s agent and endorsed by him.

The two of them decided that Atalla should not premiere at the Met in a so-called "secondary" role(!!!)--- as if there is such a thing for a 24 year old invited to sing at the Met for the first time in his life. Even odder, and again I read the agent’s very strong influence in this, Atalla did not like it that Brian Zeger told him that he had to change voice coaches. Apparently the young singers have choices and go to different teachers for coaching. In one of these changes the agent suggested the wife of his own partner. Atalla loved this woman who took him under her wing. Brian went to hear a lesson and did not like what he heard. Told Atalla point blank that it was wrong for his voice and he would have to change coaches. Atalla refused. And went a step further. Abandoned the Lindemann Program altogether. He feels he is "ready" and will now start his career in earnest always led by what he thinks are the skillful hands of his agent. I immediately called Brian who, to his great sorrow, confirmed this version and said that unfortunately this is what happened. He also noticed that Scotto, Atalla was always a bit prickly with any suggestion that put him in a position of "needing correction". I can and do attribute that to his youth and inexperience but the sad part is that he is completely under the influence of his agent in whom he believes totally and is unable to understand that an agent is just that: an agent. Their interest is making as much money out of any singer they can, for as long (or as short) as they can...

I ran home, picked up the phone and called Atalla in Brazil. He was rehearsing for his São Paulo recital and said he would contact me later. He did and came up with the same old, silly story. BUT he did add he very much wanted to see me in Brazil and hear both Pepe’s and my advice. I dared to hope. So we arranged to meet upon my return. He also begged me to call his agent who he said would explain it all very well... "Why should I call your agent Atalla? His interests are totally opposed from ours as regards you." I finally did, what could I lose? Got him in the car going to Rio to hear Atalla’s recital on July 14th. "Why should I talk to YOU?" he says outright. Why indeed?

"Excuse me" I say, gently, politely. "I am only calling because Atalla begged me. My only interest is in Atalla’s welfare, preparing and preserving his voice. I also happen to be the person who made it possible for him to come to New York". He mellows and repeats the same bla-bla-
"I want Atalla to sing major roles in Palermo, Athens etc before coming to the Met!!!" (Palermo? Athens? When at 24 you are premiering at the Met!)
Suavely, he proceeds;
"Atalla will NOT abandon his studies. I have arranged for him to continue coaching with Mrs X whom he loves who will be preparing him whenever he has a major role. For free!" I have heard that before. We were getting nowhere. So I dropped the subject and hung up.
Back in Brazil Atalla began to "run away" from me. Could not reach him, neither by Email, nor cell phone, nor home phone in Belém. Called his tenor friend in São Paulo, Richard Bauer. Richard says: "He is here at his girlfriend’s house." Richard makes an appointment to talk. Would Atalla come? The three of them did come. Sat on my terrace. A beautiful afternoon. I told Atalla that I had heard, Brian, his agent and now I would hear him and then he would hear me. After which he would have to take a final decision. Brian Zeger had been SO noble as to agree to take Atalla back to the Lindemann Programme if he decided he wanted to return. On one condition. Atalla would have to understand that in a coming back for his second year, the Met would be responsible for selecting his repertoire. The agent already having lined him up for a Romeo in Rio this Sep which according to Brian he should not sing.
After three long hours I was drained, exhausted, put through the wringer. I realized that Atalla truly does not understand the enormity of the foolishness of his decision. Pepe arrived and clarified it some more. Huge, liquid, brown eyes open wide.
"Dona Bea do you think I have been ungracious towards the Met (and all my supporters?)"
"Atalla, Atalla need I answer?"

"All right I think I can return for one more year."
"You must write Brian, those conditions self understood."

"Will you correct my English?"
"Gladly."
"On Monday I’ll get it to you."

Monday comes and goes.
Nothing.
Tuesday.
Nothing.
Wednesday I call. He says: "I will write BUT I did talk to my agent". Oh
dear.
Nothing.
Thursday.
Nothing.
Friday Pepe calls him using another number as he had begun evading our known numbers.

"Atalla, if it is money you need to help you over the coming year we can help." He promises to write.
Nothing.
Saturday Pepe and I went to Trancoso for a week and Atalla returned to Belém.
Upon our return.
Nothing.

Thus ends "The Atalla Story" (Part 1)
on a very,
very,
sad,
little note.

These last few months the Amazon forest has been burning... The worst drought in sixty years assailing the entire southern reaches of the forest. Fires spreading. Out of control. Huge areas incinerated. Devastation. As a direct consequence, this month the waters dropped to their lowest levels ever in the last fifty years. Catastrophic situation. Communities along the dried out river beds (Igarapés- offshoots from the main rivers Solimões and Negro) are isolated and cut off from the world. Running out of food and needing help.

A dolphin is seen struggling. A heart rending wail breaks the stillness. A profound lament. A once glorious pink?
No.
Only a sad,
sorry,
lustreless,
listless and lifeless,
grey.
In September 2010 Pepe and I were back for the opening of the Met season. I bumped into Sarah Billinghurst who is one of the casting directors and who on the famous day of Atalla´s audition was not present. She however became enchanted by him and subsequently had him sing at her home for a private recital (before he refused the Traviata role) I immediately told her how terribly sorry I was that he had abandoned the Lindemann Program and did attribute that in part to his youth, inexperience and also influence of his agent especially after the Met went out of its way to include him. I am convinced that Atalla still does not realize what it meant to be the "menino dos olhos" (as we say here) of James Levine.

Sarah is a large, tea-cosy-like type of a woman. Smiling serenely she says to me;
"Bea, don´t you worry at all. Sometimes these young singers do have to go off on their own. He will continue studying with Kathy Green and that is all right (after all we do have her as one of our coaches) Besides he is too great a talent to be ignored and I will be keeping my eyes on him". So vastly relieved and ever hopeful, I decided to just relax and be confident. In April in New York I called Atalla because we love him dearly and are concerned about him and for his career. We agreed to meet at the Met where he was rehearsing. He and his agent did accept (and keep) a "cover" role in Lucia di Lamermoor when the Met would be on tour this June in Japan. After the earthquake and the tsunami all that was "in the air" as the Met was not sure that they would go. The Met finally decided to go ahead with the trip. Sarah Billinghurst, Peter Gelb, Jonathan Friend and other members of the Met´s Board also went along.

On July 4th the Met sponsors a recital in Central Park which always includes its wonderful young singers who are actually still participating
in or have been a part of the Lindemann Program. Plus an already renowned star. This year the tenor was to have been Dimitri Pittas. On Sunday July 3 he calls in, sick. Sarah Billinghurst is true to her word. She calls Atalla’s agent. Monday morning Atalla was advised that he would sing that night in the Park. He bowls the critics over. Atalla takes his first steps into history.

A pink dolphin is seen once more rejoicing in Amazonian waters. And we, lucky mortals, by mere chance will have the good fortune to hear Atalla right here, in São Paulo sing Romeo on August 11th and Aug 13th at the Theatro São Pedro in Gounod’s Romeo and Juliet.

São Paulo, August 2011

Atalla makes his Met début singing Alfredo in La Traviata on March 29, 2017. Naturally I am in the audience. Back to back he sings Christian in Cyrano de Bergerac which will be the last opera of the 2016/2017 season. Naturally I’ll be there too.

September 2009 Atalla, Tia Chapman and I
With Brian Zeger, five weeks later