

A NIGHT AT THE OPERA

The following is an excerpt from a letter written by Lowell Clark Pratt to his mother Alice dated March 20, 1916. It describes his experience as an extra in "Aida" at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York.

Douglas and I met downtown Monday afternoon at 5:45 o'clock and went to dinner together. Then we went over to the Opera House. As we had an admission card, we passed by the long line of men who were waiting for a chance to "supe" and went down into the "super" room in the basement. We asked the "super" captain, a young Italian, for a first-act job, but he said they were all taken so we had to content ourselves with a job which lasted only during the second scene of the second act.

The "super" captain told us to get into some costumes, which we did without much difficulty. At first Douglas and I had the same kind of costumes, but after we were all dressed, the "super" captain asked Douglas to change to another costume and consequently we had entirely different jobs when we got up on the stage.

I don't know exactly what I was supposed to be. I have a sneaking idea I was a woman! If I was a man, I was a peculiar specimen. There were four others dressed the way I was. Here's a sketch of what I looked like:



Up on the stage, I carried a pampus-plume fan on a long pole, like this---



We were all ready to go on the stage when the first act began, but we had to wait for nearly an hour until the second act started. Douglas represented a priest, and his costume was similar to mine, except that it was white with black designs on it, and he wore a cone-shaped helmet.

While we were waiting down in the "super" room, which looked like a locker room in any gymnasium, we had a chance to see what kind of men most of the supers were. Of course, we were so far away from the stage that we couldn't hear any of the music.

The majority of the "supers" might be called "professionals" because they do that kind of work nearly every night. They were as tough a lot of men as I have ever seen. They are the kind of men who sit on the park benches during the daytime. Nearly all of them were in soldier's costumes and these "bums" looked funny in full armor.

When the bell rang for the second act we all lined up and marched up onto the stage, behind the scene, of course. The first scene of the second act was going on when we arrived, and we could hear Mme. Homer¹ and Mme. Rappold² singing. We came up on the north side of the stage and then went around to the south side where we waited until it was time for us to enter.

There was a big crowd of people behind the scenes, including the men and women of the chorus, the army and the principals. In this crowd were two pure white horses, which were used in the procession. They stood very still, in spite of the fact that people were walking under their heads and that there was considerable confusion and noise....

I began to have peculiar sensations when I marched out on the stage, with the chorus booming away behind me, the band and orchestra playing madly in front of me, and thousands of people gazing at the stage from the immense opera house with its five tiers of balconies. The house was so dark that I wouldn't have recognized you and Dad if you had been on the front row, but I could see thousands of faces, all just alike. The rows of red exit-lights around the balconies looked just like Japanese lanterns.

From the raised place where I stood I had a fine view of the stage. When Mme. Homer came up to the throne, the King arose to welcome her, and as he handed her into her seat, I heard her say to him, "Now, do it real fatherly." I was directly behind the King, but I had a good chance to

¹ Louise Homer, who played Amneris.

² Marie Rappold, who played the lead role, Aida.

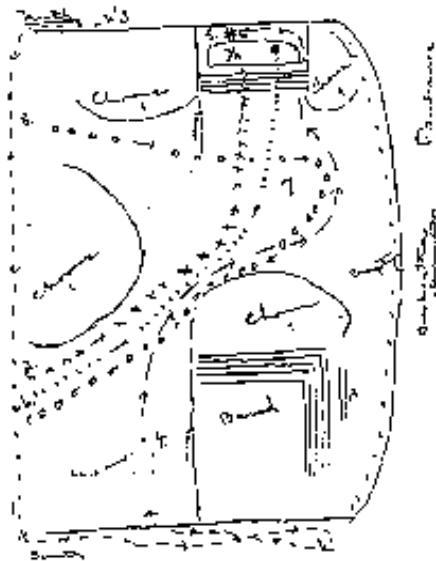
gaze upon Homer. I also had a fine view of the very beautiful dance which was performed before the throne.

I had several varieties of thrills when the army paraded in, headed by the trumpeters playing that stirring march, which Dad is familiar with, I'm sure. Four trumpeters came in playing the march in one key, then later four more came in playing it in another key; then they played it through together, standing at the place marked A.

When the army marched by the throne, then came the trophies of the war, including a number of idols. Douglas had to help carry one of these idols in the parade....

When Martinelli,³ playing the role of the hero, and Amato,⁴ in the role of the Ethiopian King and father of Aida came in, the real opera began. Martinelli sang to the King most of the time, so I had a chance to observe his facial expressions. At the grand finale, all of the principals were out on the center of the stage and all singing at once, aided by the chorus, the orchestra, and the band. Some noise!

At the end of the scene we had to get back to the "super" room as quickly as possible and we were unable to hear or see any more of the opera. However, we felt repaid for the time we spent. It was an experience which I shall never forget.



- Key to Diagram
1. Chorus singing as curtain rises.
 2. Enter the King (Amato) - X X X (Lined)
 3. My tasks before going on stage...
 4. Enter an armed follower by flanking
gals. Gun Aids - marches
 5. When I attend during rest of acts
 6. Enter the King daughter (Homer).....
 7. Dance by about 20 girls in formation
 8. Procession - line of march - o o o

³ Giovanni Martinelli, who played Radames.

⁴ Pasquale Amato.