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Behind the scenes at the Met...

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When the curtain goes up on a Metropolitan Opera production, it means more than the start of the opera. It represents an attempt to present the perfect opera.

"The Met is a well defined and successful attempt at combining all forces of theater and music into one force that would make an absolutely perfect opera," said Barry Mann, public relations coordinator for the Detroit Grand Opera Association. "The standards of the Met are terrifically high."

The standards touch each aspect of an opera—to the singers on stage,

the orchestra members in the pit, the crew preparing the stage, the make-up personnel and even to the man in charge of the 40,000 librettos, the books interpreting the foreign lyrics, which he sells on tour.

The meshing of every person's job into perfect theater is what a Met production is all about. What the audience sees when the curtain rises is a beautiful set and well-trained singers in lavish costumes.

What they don't see is the backstage activity that Mann described as "a well-coordinated Chinese fire drill."

The Met's 20th opening night performance at Detroit's Masonic Auditorium was Monday.

ONE HOUR before the performance, Justino Diaz was singing in his dressing room. He sang the principal role of Palemon in the performance of Jules Massenet's opera "Thais."

Within the room of hospital-green walls, grimy windows, bare light bulbs and a hard metal chair, Diaz chatted easily as he began his transformation from a young to old man.

He isn't particularly excited about opening night.

"When you're on tour for 7½ weeks, every city is an opening night," he said. "Instead of getting stage fright or becoming excited, you think about all the things you have to think about for the performance."

While Diaz, dressed in a blue and white kimono dressing gown, was filling the table with his beard, wig and make-up brushes, Harry Lasley brought Diaz his pay check.

The scene could have taken place in any business office, as they reviewed Diaz's working schedule and the money he should be receiving.

On the other side of the stage, Beverly Sills was sitting, fully costumed, in her dressing room. Ms. Sills sings the feminine lead, Thais. Her name was barely visible on the door and inside she was surrounded by a dressing table, a spinet piano and a place to sit—nothing to salute her star status.

"THE AURA surrounding opera is much more practical today," said Mann. It's a hard business and a complicated job. It's as difficult as being a stock broker. Sometime the sun's up, sometime it's down.

For Betsy Norden, the sun is shining on her career. Born in Cincinnati, she grew up in New York where she began her career in musical comedy.

As she applied her lipstick and attached chiffon "jobbies" from her costume to her arms, she talked about life with the Met.

"You have to be pretty lucky to be with the Met. I was in the chorus my first three seasons and then got promoted to soloist. In each of the five years as soloist, the roles got better and better.

"If you love to sing, there's nothing better than being with the Met."

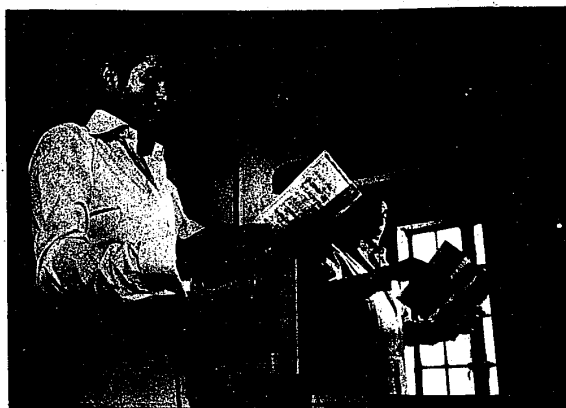
The 5-foot-2-inch, 112-pound woman sang the principal role of the slave Crobyl in "Thais."

Just as concerned with their make-up were chorus members Anna Marie White and Ann Sessions. Sitting next to each other at long wood tables under sparse fluorescent light, they enlarged their eyes with make-up and put on their wigs while Rose Murphy checked each female chorus member's costume, trying each zipper.

The 80 crew members, some on tour with the Met, some hired locally, drank coffee and smoked cigarettes off stage. They'd done their work for the opening curtain hours before.

BUT WHEN THE CRY warning of the scene change is heard, everyone prepares for changing the sets for the second act. They only had a half hour to do it.

Stanley Levine, Met stage manager, yelled command after command. The stage hands rushed to their places, moving set pieces that



Justino Diaz uses his dressing room to warm up his voice.

takes the 'strength' of 10 men to handle.

"These are mammoth sets," said Robert Johnston Jr. of Livonia. He was working back stage, hired through his union.

Mann said the sets for "Thais" are borrowed from the San Francisco Opera Company and that sets for other operas taken on tour are adaptations of the New York Met's house sets. The auditorium there is taller, deeper and wider than any auditorium the opera company visits on tour.

Once the second act began, the tension eased. Chorus members stood in the wings, waiting for their cues.

There are no prima donnas there, even among the leading characters waiting for their entrances.

They were all just waiting to do their job.

BUT FOR VINCE ZERILLE of Detroit and Harold Daitch of Southfield, being back stage has a different meaning. They are both "supers"—local people who get non-speaking parts in the operas.

"I get to meet all the great singers," said Zerille, who's been a super for 10 years. "My biggest thrill was being on stage in 'Aida' with Franco Corelli when I was an Egyptian soldier. 'I was on stage in 'Tosca' with Richard Tucker, Robert Merrill and Renata Tebaldi."

Supers get paid \$3 per opera.

"I would do this for nothing," Zerille added. This season Zerille will be a super in six operas. Daitch will be in three. He's been a super for nine years.

While he waited in the wings, he said hello to Met members he's known over the years.

For almost eight weeks on the road, giving eight performances in six days like they're doing in Detroit, the Met people give all they've got to satisfy their audiences. When working out of their own theater in New

York, they do it all again, even while they are learning roles and making sets and programs for next season's operas.

"When I go to the opera, I'm like a surfer looking for a perfect wave," said Mann. "Every once in a while it happens. The perfect wave comes along. You get smacked against the shore, and then start looking for it again."

That's what the Met, with the efforts of those behind stage, those on the stage and those in the orches-

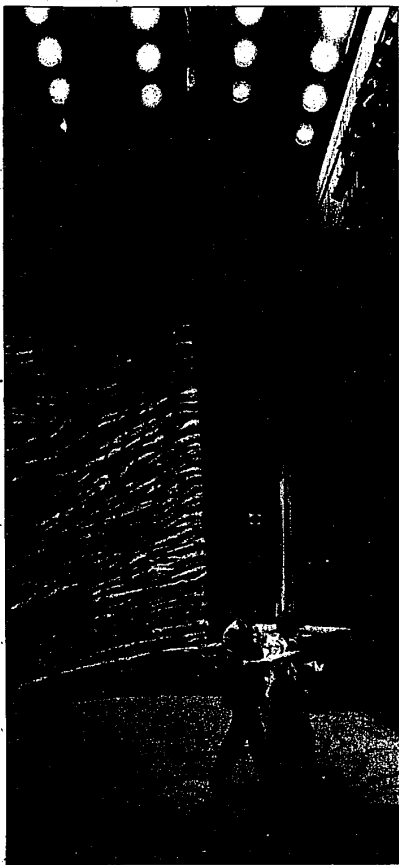
tra pit, try to create every time the curtain rises.

They'll try to do this Thursday, May 25, in the 8 p.m. production of Gaetano Donizetti's opera "La Favorita." And in Friday night's performance of Giuseppe Verdi's "Rigoletto." And in the two productions Saturday.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's "Don Giovanni" will be the matinee performance. At night, the Met will perform "Madama Butterfly" by Giacomo Puccini.



"You have to be pretty lucky to be in the Met," said Betsy Norden.



Walking across the set for "Thais" was Raymond Gibbs (above), looking like any opera goer rather than a lead performer. Fascinated by the work of the stage crew was wardrobe woman Betty Craig (right) from St. Clair Shores.



For 10 Metropolitan Opera seasons, Kenna Christl (above) has applied her own makeup before going on stage. Working in less than ideal lighting conditions and setting up her own makeup tables all across the country are all a part of the job. While the singers get themselves ready visually and vocally, the stage crew (left) transforms the stage for the next act. It takes 80 people to move the massive scenery into place, under the guidance of at least two stage managers.