

## Looking for help in a modern hell: Glimmerglass Opera's 'The Consul'

By Wayne Myers  
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COOPERSTOWN, N.Y. – Rarely has bureaucracy been given such a pretty face. In Glimmerglass Opera's production of Gian Carlo Menotti's 1950 opera "The Consul," the tale of a bureaucracy so caught up in red tape that it ends up destroying the very people it was designed to help, that face belongs to Leah Wool.

Wool, seen in Central New York last spring as Meg in Syracuse Opera's staging of Mark Adamo's "Little Women," plays The Secretary, an indifferent office despot who'd rather be doing anything else than helping any of the motley assemblage of desperate people filling the Waiting Room of the consulate of a country "somewhere in Europe."



She gives bureaucracy a lovely mezzo voice, too.

"Your name is a number, your story's a case, your need a request. Your hopes will be filed. Come back next week," The Secretary, whose workday revolves around an IBM Selectra electric typewriter, vacantly sings to a 6-8 waltz.

You can meet The Secretary's type anywhere at a time in your life when you need help the most.

To the consulate comes Magda Sorel, under pressure from the secret police of the unnamed country that shares a border with the consulate's country, apparently a democracy. Said police, led by a Scarpia-like thug out of Puccini's "Tosca," are determined to arrest Magda's husband John, leader of an underground movement. Wounded, John flees to the border but will not cross until his wife and family get the visas they need to join him.

The desperation of Magda's plight fails to move The Secretary. Forms must be filled out. Questionnaires must be completed. A birth certificate, passport and three 3X3 photos are mandatory to begin the process. It's a system that ensures impartiality. No one case has greater weight than any other, and anyone who objects to that can simply "try another consulate."

Consigned to the antiseptic Waiting Room, Magda sits on molded-plastic chairs under the harsh glare of fluorescent lights, waiting for days on end to see The Consul about the visas she and her family's survival depends on.

For a long time, it seems doubtful that The Consul, who is never seen, even exists.

As circumstances quickly stack up against her, Magda realizes that the consulate is cooperating with the police state.

Finally, time and hope run out.

“The Consul,” Menotti’s first full-length opera, premiered on March 1, 1950 at the Shubert Theatre on Broad Street in Philadelphia, not far from the Curtis Institute of Music, where the composer graduated from in 1933 and later taught, on Locust Street. It opened on Broadway at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on March 15.

"The Consul" proved to be far more than just a "journalistic" opera.

Menotti had already achieved success on Broadway in 1947 with a double bill of “The Telephone” and “The Medium” (Syracuse Opera staged the latter work as a part of a double bill with Leoncavallo’s “Pagliacci” in 2008), and he would again with “The Consul.” The opera netted him a Pulitzer Prize in Music in 1950—he collected a second one in 1955 for “The Saint of Bleeker Street”—and the Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Musical.

The Italian-born Menotti, who also wrote his own libretti, considered himself an American composer although he never obtained United States citizenship. He composed the NBC-commissioned “Amahl and the Night Visitors,” the first opera to be written specifically for television in America, which aired at NBC’s Studio 8H in Rockefeller Center on Christmas Eve, 1951. A Christmastime favorite, “Amahl and the Night Visitors” is today the composer’s most popular work. Menotti also founded the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy in 1958 and its American equivalent, the Charleston, S.C.-based Spoleto U.S.A., in 1977. Known chiefly for his operatic works, Menotti also wrote ballets, symphonies and cantatas.

The aria “To This We’ve Come,” Magda’s ringing denouncement of a system that denies the humanity of the people forced to turn to it for help, was a show-stopper for soprano Patricia Neway on the opera’s opening night on Broadway.

And it was for soprano Melissa Citro, a sheer theatrical force throughout the Sam Helfrich-directed Glimmerglass Opera production, which opened Saturday night, July 25.

Mezzo-soprano Joyce Castle, as The Mother, had many in the Alice Busch Opera Theater audience nodding with understanding as she sung “Lullaby,” becoming every grandmother that has ever tried to make a baby smile.

Menotti displayed his flair for the bizarre (he was at his creepiest with the ominous mood he established in “The Medium”) by throwing the visa-seeking Magician into the entanglement. Tenor John Easterlin’s Magician, dressed in an appalling tan leisure suit with a silk print shirt, was a whirlwind, unraveling The Secretary’s composure by unleashing a wave of magic tricks in the Waiting Room in an attempt to prove himself worthy of a visa.

Menotti’s exceptionally orchestrated score, fleshed out well by Glimmerglass Opera Music Director David Angus, contains several nods to Puccini, including The Foreign Woman’s plea for a visa to visit her dying sister.

Baritones Michael Chioldi and Robert Kerr’s work as John Sorel and The Secret Police Agent was excellent.

As the visa seekers, baritone David Kravitz as Mr. Kofner, soprano Jacqueline Noparstak as The Foreign Woman, mezzo-soprano Eve Gigliotti as Vera Boronel (she almosts breaks down for joy when she finally receives a visa) and soprano Valentina Fleer as Anna Gomez all did fine work, as did baritone Kevin Wetzel, who played Assan, a member of the underground movement.

Set designer Andrew Lieberman's stark and non-descript Waiting Room, flooded with Jane Cox's eerie fluorescent lighting, elevated the mundane to the chilling. Kaye Voyce's costumes kept the time period vague.

"The Consul" hasn't aged a day in the 59 years since its premiere.

It's our tragedy it hasn't.

"The Consul." Music and libretto by Gian Carlo Menotti. A Glimmerglass Opera production directed by Sam Helfrich and conducted by David Angus. Set design by Andrew Lieberman, lighting design by Jane Cox and costumes by Kaye Voyce. Sung in English with projected titles.

At the Alice Busch Opera Theater, Route 80, Cooperstown, N.Y. Remaining performances: Aug. 1 (matinee), 7, 9 (matinee), 15, 18 (matinee), 22 (matinee) and 24 (matinee). Tickets and information: (607) 547-2255 or [www.glimmerglass.org](http://www.glimmerglass.org).

Photo: Robert Kerr, left, as The Secret Police Agent, Leah Wool as The Secretary, and Michael Chioldi as John Sorel in Glimmerglass Opera's production of Gian Carlo Menotti's "The Consul."  
(Photo by: Richard Termine.)