

STEPHEN SALTERS

Richard Dyer talks with the star of Opera Boston's *The Nose*



STEPHEN SALTERS HAS BEEN IGNITING opera performances and concerts in Boston for two decades. Even when he was still a student at Boston University, he was the one who dominated the stage, the one you couldn't take your eyes and ears off.

Since those days he has returned regularly to sing with Opera Boston (he was in Gluck's *Alceste* and in Kurt Weill's *Mahagonny*), with Boston Baroque (Handel's *Alcina* and Gluck's *Iphegenie en Tauride*), and Opera Unlimited (the world premiere of Elena Ruehr's *Toussaint Before the Spirits*, a one-act work designed to showcase the extraordinary range, power and stamina of his voice and as well as his uninhibited theatrical presence).

But in this country at least, he has never tackled a role as challenging as the "collegiate assessor" Kovalyov in Dmitri Shostakovich's operatic adaptation of Nikolai Gogol's famous short story, *The Nose*. One fateful day, and in the second scene of the opera, Kovalyov wakes up without his nose, which has taken on a life of its own. From that moment Kovalyov is rarely offstage, and in his search for a reunion with his nose, he's singing most of the time, lofting more high notes than Rigoletto or any other Verdi baritone, sometimes spinning a *bel canto* line, sometimes vigorously declaiming text across the full range of his voice, while acting in confusion, rage and relief as he encounters disbelief, bureaucracy, hostility and ridicule.

There are something like 70 solo roles in *The Nose*, most of them quite short, but it is Kovalyov who must carry the show.

We spoke with Salters before rehearsals for Opera Boston's production began, but the baritone had already been working on the opera for months, and was busy arranging a visa so that he could fly to St. Petersburg to work on the role with Russian experts.

But in a sense Salters has been building up to this role for years. He is an accomplished pianist who has performed "Rhapsody in Blue" and Rachmaninoff's Second Concerto in public, so he has been teaching himself the demanding music from the keyboard. But he has also been working on singing in Russian since he went to live in Europe in 1996. "Actually it began before that," Salters recalls. "When I was a fellow at the Tanglewood Music Center, we all had to study Russian diction with one of the coaches."

But the great leap forward came a few years later. "I was singing at the Paris Opera, and I met a Russian coach there named Svtlana Kratsova. She told me I should learn two of the principal Russian roles, Eugene Onegin [in] Tchaikovsky's opera, and Yeletsky in *The Queen of Spades*. So I worked on them with her, and she also wanted me to put together a program of songs on texts by the poet Pushkin – she called him 'the black Russian,' because his great-grandfather was African. I was of course fascinated by this; I had no idea of this fact about Pushkin. I worked up a whole recital program, which I have performed in various places in Europe and America, and I am now putting together a version of it with orchestra which I will

perform in Brussels. But *The Nose* will be the first Russian opera I have performed in full, on stage."

He says learning the tricky music has been a challenge. "Not many people know it, and no pianist wants to play it – a lot of the music is very fast. It's 'on your mark, get set, GO!' all the way. So I am looking forward to learning how the conductor Gil Rose is going to shape this music. There is a lot of ensemble writing, especially in the third act, and that is very hard to rehearse in advance in the absence of the other people, and not knowing what they are going to be doing. Or for that matter, what I am going to be doing myself."

So Salters was eager to start work with the Russian-born Israeli stage director Julia Pevzner. "I am very curious to learn

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the take she will have on the story," he says. "I don't even know yet how the designer is going to take off my nose. But I already have my own ideas about the part. This is an absurdist piece, but I don't think that aspect of it needs to be played up, at least by me. The greatest comedies, I've noticed, need to be played absolutely straight. Part of the comedy in this opera is that Kovalyov takes *himself* so seriously. He is stone cold serious about getting his nose back, and putting it on straight, so I think I need to play it that way. I am also wondering if there is a sense in which the character evolves through his various experiences, the way the Count does in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. Does Kovalyov become a better person by the end? I don't know for sure yet; he does try to pick up a pretty street-vendor in the last scene!"

SALTERS GREW UP in Milford, Connecticut and had no idea that he would one day become a singer, let alone an opera singer. “My ambition,” he says, “was to be a concert pianist. Even though I started late, at 13, by the time I was 16 I was winning some competitions. I loved the piano, loved trying 20 or 30 ways of playing the same phrase. It never occurred to me that what I was really doing was emoting. And when I played the piano something dramatic or theatrical was coming through, although I never thought of it that way.”

Salters was active in the First Baptist Church in Milford when a new organist and choir director came to audition for a job there. “I sang in the choir in order to spy on all the candidates. This man, his name was Frank Bullware, said he needed a male voice to sing a solo in the spiritual ‘Steal Away.’ I practiced like mad but I wasn’t sure I could do it, and I discovered for sure that I couldn’t sing and play the piano at the same time. When I stood at the pulpit and opened my mouth to sing, I had a true out-of-the-body experience – I was somehow looking out over myself, and I had no sense that I was singing; my spirit body had left my physical body behind. In that instant, I knew what I was supposed to be doing all along – like Moses when he heard the voice from the burning bush. I had to sing the spiritual a second time, and the sounds I was producing had never come out of my mouth before. The church offered this man the job. He accepted, and he said to me, ‘Young man, you are going to become my student,’ and I did. It was thanks to him, I

met up with my path.” This decision led to some family conflict. “My mother couldn’t believe I was going to give up the piano, but after I gave my first full recital in the church, she finally said, “OK, you can be a singer now.”

Salters came to opera through recordings. “I listened to *Carmen* and *La Bohème* and to singers like Joan Sutherland and Marilyn Horne. I had no idea who people like that were, but I was fascinated by how they communicated feeling – I knew what they were singing about, even though I didn’t know the languages they were singing in.”



Frank Bullware was a demanding teacher who regularly gave his young protégé two-hour lessons. “Once, though,” Salters recalls, “I was so busy with midterms and papers that I arrived at a lesson unprepared. He told me to go home and not to come back until I had learned what he had given me. From that five-minute lesson I learned something important about the discipline it takes to become a singer. He was a great man, a humble man.”

Salters studied at the Peabody Institute and at Boston University, where he honed a solid technique and developed sophisticated linguistic and musical skills. Longtime fans of student productions will remember how focused he was even then in parts like Mercutio in *Roméo et Juliette*, Ford in Nicolai’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Henry Davis in Weill’s *Street Scene*. Most of these were supporting roles, but

there was no doubt about the star charisma of Salters's voice and presence; he knew how to use his eyes as expressively as he used his voice.

Influenced by his teacher, Phyllis Curtin, he also studied the song literature, oratorio, and works for voice and orchestra. "I didn't want to be a specialist in Italian opera or anything else," Salters says. "I wanted to work in a variety of genres and media. Every year in my career has been a little bit different from the others, but in general I devote about 1/3 of my time to opera, 1/3 to oratorio and works with orchestra, and 1/3 to recitals."

In addition to *The Nose* Salters has recitals coming up in Washington, D. C. and in Hawaii, and performances of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* in Canada, as well as repeat performances of a song cycle on poems by Langston Hughes written by Ysaye Barnwell of *Sweet Honey in the Rock*. He has also developed a relationship with the Lark String Quartet. That shows how diverse his schedule usually is.

Salters made his professional debut in William Schuman's opera *Casey at the Bat* with conductor Leonard Slatkin in Pittsburgh and Cleveland in 1991, but the great leap forward came in 1996 when he was a national finalist in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, won a major award from the George London Foundation, and won first prize in the prestigious Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels, which launched his European career. There he has been in demand for

recitals, operatic roles both standard and unusual, and an acclaimed world premiere, Fénélon's *Les Rois* in Bordeaux.

Salters is a hard worker who is still studying regularly; he current teacher is the baritone Carlos Serrano. "I think that that over the years my voice has grown lower, rounder, and more stable," Salters says, "While that top has more body and focus to it than it used to. I think I have more colors on my palette and I know better what I want to do with them. I have always desperately wanted to communicate; I still do, but I much more able to control and direct that urge."

Several generations of African-American divas have risen to the top of the profession; the road has been steeper and rockier for male African-Americans. "Why that should be the case is still a good question," Salters says. "My big start was in Europe, and I was welcomed there as Don Giovanni and the Count in *The Marriage of Figaro*. I haven't felt the force of prejudice so much myself, but I am fully aware that others have felt it strongly in the past and are still feeling it today. But I think the door is open a little wider than it used to be; people like the tenor Lawrence Brownlee are having major careers in important theaters. And for America to embrace a President of mixed race the way it is doing – that's really something. Because of that I believe that in the next years the doors will open even more for everybody."

- Richard Dyer