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**Background**

In the ten years since he graduated from Harvard Peter Sellars has directed over 30 productions of operas and plays; has served as artistic director of the Boston Shakespeare Company (1983–84), the American National Theater in Washington (1984–86), and the Los Angeles Festival of the Arts (1987 to date); won a MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant (1983–88) and an Elliot Norton Award (1985); and was fired as director of his only Broadway assignment: the musical *My One and Only* (1983), which he helped conceive and coadapt from the work of George Gershwin. Sellars’ record of brilliant successes and spectacular failures has made his critical reputation one of extremes. To detractors, like English opera critic Rodney Milnes, Sellars is “the latest flavor-of-the-month, teen-age-genius [. . .] whose flashy, juvenile and self-advertising direction [. . .] might be tolerable in an end-of-term college production” (Henahan 1987). But for his admirers, like *Newsweek*’s Jack Kroll, Sellars is, at age 32, “the most outrageously exciting director on the American stage” (*Current Biography Yearbook* 1986). To see Peter Sellars beyond the myths he inspires is not easy.

Sellars’ “sabbatical” from theatre has lasted now for almost four years. Since the demise of his American National Theater at Washington’s Kennedy Center in August 1986, Sellars has worked almost exclusively in opera. His successes have included his cocreation with John Adams (music) and Alice Goodman (libretto) of *Nixon in China* for the Houston Grand Opera (1987); his controversial stagings of Nigel Osborne’s *The Electrification of the Soviet Union* for Britain’s Glyndebourne Festival (1987), Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* for the Chicago Lyric Opera (1988), and the acclaimed series of Mozart-Da Ponte operas he has created for the Pepsico Summerfare: *Cosi Fan Tutte* (1986); *Don Giovanni* (1987) (see plate 1), and *The Marriage of Figaro* (1988). This sustained body of operatic work has won Sellars praise from critics such as the *New Yorker*’s Andrew Porter who hails him as “America’s leading opera director” (1989a), and Patrick J. Smith, the new editor of the usually conservative *Opera News*, who used his first editorial to single out Sellars’ *Tannhäuser* for its innovative spirit, naming it “the best opera production I have seen in the past three years” (1989) (see plate 2).

When I spoke with Sellars in Boston in May 1989 while he was prepar-
ing the Mozart-Da Ponte trilogy for revival at PepsiCo, he talked about
the artistic advantages opera seemed to offer in contrast to theatre:

One reason why I have basically retired from theatre and devoted
myself exclusively to opera is because I think it elevates theatre, it
lifts theatre out of its strange self-centered depression and bizarre
self-absorption—in an age where self-absorption has already para-
lyzed the political scene—and offers a kind of artistic hope to the-
atre . . . [Opera's] form gives you permission to do what is not
allowed in theatre, which is explore a secret world . . . [those]
moments between the actions. When you explore a secret world
in theatre, John Simon and Frank Rich get nervous. When you
explore a secret world in the theatre, people say, “Gosh, isn’t
the second act dragging?” When you explore a secret world
in theatre, the actors get panicked just a little bit and say, “But I
thought—uh, uh, ah—I’m supposed to have the glass here,
and . . . he’s my uncle, right?”” (Sellars 1989).1

The other advantage opera offers is its inherent doubleness of perspec-
tive, its ability to juxtapose two elements that stimulate Sellars’ dramatic
imagination—strong, immediate emotion and the distancing power of
structured thought:

Brechtian poetics are redeemed by music. The beauty of music is
that it is a completely abstract formulation, people are singing notes,
there is no question that they are just making this up, and you
don’t confuse the person singing the role with the role [. . .] So
that wonderful Brechtian double edge of identity is always made
The Critics Debate Sellars’ Mozart

The following is a dialog composed from excerpts drawn from the following reviews: Robert Marx, Opera News; Heidi Walseon, The Wall Street Journal; Andrew Porter, The New Yorker; Will Crutchfield, The New York Times; Mark Swed, 7 Days; Otto Friedrich, Time; Peter G. Davis, New York; and Edward W. Said, The Nation.

MARX: Taken as a body of work, Sellars’ Summerfare productions have been the most stimulating and theatrically accomplished realizations of opera given in the New York area during the 1980s.

WALSEON: This is typically excessive Sellars Mozart. In exploring the unconscious motivations of these scores, he reduces their message to evil, violence and depravity.

PORTER: I would not want the Purchase Mozarts to be my, or anyone’s only Mozart. But they are not. I cannot understand any lack of clear response to passionate, stern, exciting presentations offered not as “the whole truth” about Mozart but as an important part of that truth made more vividly manifest than ever before.

CRUTCHFIELD: Art in our century has been ready to see beauty as false and ugliness as truth, and in this Mr. Sellars is an authentic spokesman for his time, but he is shouting our message at Mozart so loudly that we cannot hear part of Mozart’s to us.

SWED: Sellars happens to be an irrepressible, oftentimes vulgar genius (not unlike Mozart). But as he’s refined these productions over succeeding seasons [. . .] he has increasingly demonstrated that it is a kind of faithfulness toward and, yes—a trust—in Mozart that drives his shows.

WALSEON: In all three productions, characters are constantly throwing things (often food), slamming doors, beating each other, threatening each other with weapons [. . .]. The result is a depressing tearing apart of an 18th-century world in which manners counted and the unexpressed undercurrents were more powerful for being left that way.

FRIEDRICH: In theory, nobody should object to any adventurous director’s attempting to modernize the tradition-encrusted masterpieces of opera. At best such attempts can bring new vitality to works that have become numbingly familiar, they can enable us not only to see an opera in new ways but to see ourselves in new ways as well. And at the very least they create talk and controversy. In the case of Sellars’ Mozart, unfortunately, that is about all they create.

CRUTCHFIELD: Mr. Sellars argues in a program note that we can speak authentically only of what we have seen in our own lifetimes and that “a system of contemporary references” is a “relatively obvious” necessity. I think he is wrong to conclude this: his supporting arguments (especially about class struggle) are specious, and the consequences trip up each opera at one point or another. But I also think that if one gets hung up in this argument, one
misses some of the most precise and stimulating work being done in opera today.

MARX: Sellars’ approach, while unusual for opera in America, is part of the interpretive mainstream in American theater. [...]. In their renunciation of “international style” in opera, their abandonment of tradition for a potent if possibly limiting form of cultural immediacy, Sellars and company have focused the production of opera in America in new ways. Their artistic influence via Summerfare will be felt for a long time to come.

DAVIS: I can recall just one other comparable adventure in my operagoing life, very different in spirit but no less remarkable for its original point of view, startling insights, theatrical power, and ability to polarize audiences. Wieland Wagner’s work, as I saw it evolve in Bayreuth and Stuttgart between 1956 and 1966 had the same qualities, and Sellars’ equally uncompromising approach to opera may eventually prove to be just as influential.

WALESON: The fact that the audiences responded so positively to these productions is troubling. Perhaps people are so bored by standard productions of these familiar operas that any deviation, however perverse, is welcome, especially when it is so skillfully done.

PORTER: In all sorts of complementary ways, the execution is wonderful. Adrianne Lobel’s sets for “Figaro” and “Cosi,” George Tsypin’s for “Don Giovanni,” Dunya Ramicova’s costumes for all three, and James Ingalls’ lighting conspire with Mr. Sellars’ direction to produce one unforgettable image after another. The manner of staging is not realistic but a quicksilver compound of realistically observed behavior, antics (jokes are not absent), acrobatics, Kabuki, modern dance, sudden stillness [...]. Performance at this level is rare.

SAID: I wish I could easily appraise the final political or even theoretical import of what Sellars does. OK, so he is postmodern, deft, creative. But there is the bothersome question of his, and our, complicity with the cultural establishment that made him successful. I’d like to think he has an ironic sense about that—for instance, when he mocks late capitalism on a stage that has been munificently subsidized by Pepsico. He’s an extraordinarily gifted man, and his opera productions outstrip any others in the United States [...]. but I’m still not entirely convinced that he has really gone beyond the handful of arresting gestures that have made some of his Mozart/Da Ponte work so striking and at the same time so curiously inconclusive. Is there a whole vision or theory there?

DAVIS: These productions enrich and enlarge our perceptions of the three operas that are among the most wonderful ever written. Their social and political messages have scarcely dated [...]. One more reason why Sellars’ contemporary versions work so well, why every moment seems so real and quick. Some choose not to see it—perhaps because Sellars so unflinchingly examines the questions these timeless operas pose, ones most of us prefer to avoid: “Who are we really?” and “How do we really live?”
clear and the act of music itself—there is an orchestra there, and the singers having to look at the conductor from time to time—functions as its own permanent alienation function, if you will. At the same time, the music is all about emotional identification. So you get both processes occurring simultaneously: there is constant distancing and constant emotional immediacy—simply by working in the field, in the frame of music.

Despite the generally hostile response to Sellars’ work in Washington, one cannot help feeling that opera’s gain has been theatre’s loss. Sellars’ meteoric rise to national prominence as a stage director reminded some of another American wunderkind lost to theatre, Orson Welles (Coe 1987). Like Welles, Sellars combines intellectual brilliance, inexhaustible energy, love of film and popular culture, and a daring imagination in framing classical works in contemporary terms. Like Welles, too, Sellars dreamed of establishing a national theatre that would find a contemporary American voice for the masterworks of other times and cultures and tap into the vitality of distinctly American theatrical forms such as melodrama, political comedy, and musical theatre. Unlike Welles, whose Mercury Theatre won wide critical and popular success, and whose influence lasted for more than a generation, Sellars’ American National Theater barely made it through two seasons. Even its most notable success—Sellars’ powerful 1986 revival of Sophocles’ Ajax in a post-Vietnam setting—played to nearly empty houses.

What went wrong? For starters, Sellars’ impulsiveness and lack of administrative experience helped to create considerable chaos, and as he later admitted, “Basically I’m unsuited for running a theatre because I take everything too personally” (Coe 1987). His characteristic brashness in promising that his theatre “would reinvent the world” (American National Theater 1985) set him up for harsh criticism when his opening productions seemed blandly acted, overdirected, and technically inept (see Brustein 1985). But finally, Sellars thinks the deepest cause for the Washington failure is that he tried to make theatre political in a way the American public does not yet accept:

I was spending my twenties trying to solve a couple of problems I am not sure needed solving. Or, let’s put it this way, are solvable. Yes, they need solving. Things I felt that the generation before mine should have handled and didn’t [. . .]. There was no large-scale national theatre that was doing work at a certain level of professional accomplishment and idealism. Of course, it is frequently said that the regional theatre is America’s national theatre, but actually the American regional theatre is the American regional theatre. I wish it were a national theatre, and maybe as time goes by it will get more ambitious and become that. My only problem with it is that the American regional theatre is usually not very capable of supporting a certain centrist entry into civic life. For most Americans theatre is a side issue, theatre is over there, it doesn’t concern them.

Sellars, of course, was not the first to fail in making theatre a central feature of American life. Among others, Hallie Flanagan in the Federal Theatre Project (1935–39) and Harold Clurman with the Group Theater (1931–40) attempted to establish the socially committed popular theatre.
that Europe takes for granted. But unlike Flanagan, Clurman, or Welles, Sellers' theatre career has been dogged by questions about his directorial abilities, so that despite the originality or daring of his ideas, he has yet to create and sustain a professional theatre situation where those ideas work effectively. As his failures on the Broadway market and in Washington suggest, Sellers lacks—mostly through conscious choice—the sort of theatre outlook and training most professionals take for granted.

When he was at Harvard, for example, Sellers designed his own course of study that included seminars on Hitchcock and the early works of D.W. Griffith; psychoacoustics and spatial perception at MIT; and 18th-century poetics and electronic music. He avoided any standard "how-to" training, believing that theatre study in and for itself was wrongheaded and harmful:

One of the things that has led the American theatre to the odd netherworld that it currently inhabits was the invention of the college theatre department in the '50s, where suddenly people could concentrate on theatre and nothing else, and where theatre for its own sake, and the theatre that is about theatre, the theatre major who knows nothing but theatre were all created. Then those people went out and created the regional theatre movement, a whole American theatre that no one ever asked for, that moved independently from developments in music or dance or painting. It was theatre all by itself, all alone. Basically, theatre doesn't exist that way. Theatre can only exist in close connection to the literary scene, and close connection to the dance scene, or in close connection to the music scene. Then theatre begins to share the vitality of what's around it because theatre is a synthetic art and requires an interesting mix or blend of elements in order to become great.

In the best sense of the word, Sellers is an amateur, a self-taught lover of theatre whose eager intelligence shuns predigested ideas about orthodox practice. For that reason, he did not take the usual path of apprenticing as another director's assistant, and although he has been inspired by watching fellow directors at work—especially Elizabeth LeCompte of the Wooster Group and filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard—Sellers feels that any director's art is so idiosyncratic it cannot be taught as a method to anyone else. His own earliest lessons came in practical experience with the Margot Lovelace Marionette Theater, starting when he was only ten. During the summers of the next decade, he toured with the puppets playing actor, director, choreographer, sound and scenic designer all in one. From this early experience came one of his most important ideas: that any production is in perpetual evolution, and any performance is just another rehearsal in an ongoing process of discovery. That notion may make Broadway nervous, but Sellers would come to see it as part of a chancy, Dionysian heritage that makes the theatre he loves come alive:

For David Garrick or for Edmund Kean a role would evolve across a lifetime. And in a way those people had no rehearsal, but in another way, every single performance was a rehearsal. That's of course how the Wooster Group works; they keep working on these things in performance. [. . .] I got some of that sense because all of my early years were spent in a puppet theatre in Denver work-
ing on the street and doing [. . .] five shows a day [. . .]. You just get into the habit of learning while working and at the same time your experiments are in close contact with the public. [. . .] George F. Kaufman did it, for God's sake. You work on it in Philadelphia. The audiences in Philadelphia wrote You Can't Take It With You [. . .]. But that was the last time in which theatre as process was permitted. Where you just assume that a lot of your performances were part of finding the show, not just presenting a product.

Sellars' puppet theatre experiences gave him the confidence to trust his own process and to look for his own solutions; much of his originality lies in those simple but audacious decisions. When as a freshman at Harvard he was denied the use of the Loeb Theatre stage because of hostile response to his seedily Edwardian production of the Sitwell-Walton Façade, Sellars created his own theatre, the Explosives B Cabaret, in the basement of Adams House. He staged almost 30 productions at Harvard, many of which were so controversially original—such as King Lear imagined by a disintegrating Lincoln Continental, or a condensed Ring des Nibelungen with puppets—that important critics, and Robert Brustein in particular, began to take notice. Sellars returned to the main stage at the Loeb during his senior year to direct Gogol's The Inspector General for the 1980 inaugural season of Brustein's American Repertory Theatre. At a time when his peers were applying to graduate school, Sellars was chalking up his first professional credits.

For all of his commitment to American culture, the deepest lessons Sellars learned—including his conviction that theatre should be an active social force—came from European innovators. He read and staged de Ghelderode, Beckett, Cocteau, and Handke long before he read—and avoided staging—Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Even in his puppet theatre days, Sellars was working with the scenographic ideas of Josef Svoboda. As master creator-performer of a street theatre in Denver, the adolescent Sellars was living the theory of a total theatre he would later read about in Wagner, Craig, and Appia. He acknowledges that his vision of theatre as a binding element in society may be Wagnerian, but jokes: "Wagner, of course, had another condition: that [theatre] bind the society and promote his career. I'm less emphatic about the second one. I don't care who is running a national theatre. It is not important to me. I care that one exists that makes a statement that theatre is a central element of the national life."

A year in Europe before he entered Harvard was crucial to Sellars' development. He was strongly influenced by the work of Giorgio Strehler—especially his realistic staging of The Marriage of Figaro (1976)—and touring productions of Andre Serban's Greek plays and Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre. In these works Sellars saw concrete examples of the choreographic, emotive, and highly imagistic theatre he wanted to create. Years later, a visit to Yuri Lyubimov's Taganka Theatre in Moscow would convince Sellars that the idealism and integrity of a single, local theatre could become the spiritual and political focus of an entire nation, and thus was born a model for what Sellars would try to emulate in Washington (see Bly 1985).

The most important of all European influences on Sellars has been the Russian director, Vsevolod Meyerhold, with whom Sellars identifies strongly and whose work and theories he studied as an undergraduate. It
is not an accident that Sellars’ first professional production was directing Meyerhold’s signature piece, The Inspector General, anymore than it was an accident that the ill-fated My One and Only featured a Constructivist setting in the Meyerhold style. In fact, many would argue that the basic elements of Sellars’ directing style, including the provocative contrast he draws between text and setting and his use of nonpsychological gesture to advance ideas and themes, parallel Meyerhold’s pioneering work (see Littlejohn 1990). It is Meyerhold’s example as an outspoken advocate of theatre’s social responsibility and aesthetic freedom in the face of repression and literalness that moves Sellars most deeply and offers him a healing model for his current involvement in opera:

Meyerhold turned for most of his life to music to solve the problem of how an abstract and choreographic stage also has the tremendous emotional resonance that Stanislavski was looking for but was sometimes elusive. Meyerhold called it “musical realism.” Now what is interesting is that at the end of Stanislavski’s life he basically turned to opera as his last project, the end of his journey. In fact when Harold Clurman and all those people went to visit Stanislavski in 1935, he was engaged in all these biomechanic experiments with actors—he had them interacting with machines—and he was very busy in his opera studio. In any case, when the Meyerhold Theatre was closed down finally by Stalin in ‘36, Meyerhold was a marked man. But then Stanislavski did something tremendously courageous. He and Meyerhold, of course, had done pitched battle for 20 years, had been engaged in polemics ever since Meyerhold defected from the company after Seagull. Now, Stanislavski was the only man in Russia who could save Meyerhold’s life, and he did. He immediately hired Meyerhold as the director of his opera studios, and the strangely beautiful thing was that as Stanislavski was confined to his bed, Meyerhold directed Stanislavski’s last production. I’ve always felt that very emotionally. I’ve always felt that the healing of that rift, and the saving of that life—in some strange way it was as if both men’s lives were saved—was through opera. Opera was the grounds on which the two opposing camps of dramaturgy in the 20th century—and its two greatest directors—finally met.

Sellars’ own artistic journey is still near its start, and—given his endurance and his inventiveness in shaping experience toward positive ends—perhaps it will lead him back to theatre. He hopes so. Meanwhile, the key ideas of his theatre sensibility are tested and given shape regularly in his own Boston-based opera studio—a free-floating group of performers and designers that he and conductor Craig Smith have worked with for almost a decade. As we watch Sellars in rehearsal with this group for his production of Mozart’s The Marriage of Figaro, we may find in his conceptions and methods some of our own theatrical future.

Rehearsal

It is late June 1988. The Sellars company is in Boston rehearsing for the Figaro opening at PepsiCo in July. Their rehearsal room is a large loft at Emmanuel Church, where Craig Smith is Director of Music. An escape
door lets air into the space, along with the humidity of a 90-degree day. As the afternoon wears on, the heat and some jet lag—the group is just back from a European tour—combine to blur the focus of rehearsal. Craig Smith responds by bringing a small rotating fan from his office which he places on the floor pointing toward the actors. The hominess of Sellars’ group, its no-frills, improvised practicality lives in this small gesture. A Ricardo Muti or a James Levine might have had the impulse, but one suspects an assistant would have fetched the fan, and pointed it perhaps at the maestro. The focus in a Peter Sellars rehearsal is on the actors.

The director himself is remarkably unobtrusive. Sellars is always in his central place between the production table and the podium before rehearsals begin. He seldom takes breaks or lunch, and he is often the last to leave. But there is little sense of everyone focusing attention on him. Quite the opposite, it is he who watches to see what is happening, and to make something of it. To him, this is the key to his directing; he does not invent, he gathers:

A director’s main function is to listen and to collate because you are constantly surrounded by ideas [. . .]. It is not a function of creativity, it is a function of [. . .] paying attention and beginning to realize that, of course, that’s an idea [. . .] and you’ve heard another idea from a designer, and you realize that, of course, there’s a place where those two ideas meet [. . .] or are completely contradictory and can be placed next to each other to very desirable theatrical effect. You can work the contradictions as much as you work the assonances [. . .] but a director can’t do anything in a room alone.

In Sellars’ rehearsal room there is a lively ebb and flow of professionals going about their jobs without fuss. Only in laughter does Sellars take focus. Company jokes tend to center on or emanate from him. Follow the laughter in the room and you will know where Peter Sellars is even when you cannot see him or do not at first notice he is there.

Sellars has the appearance of a droll and cagey teenager. He is quite small—about 5’3”—partly as the result of childhood bone disease. A full face and pale blue eyes express Sellars’ response to the moment and change quickly from intense, puckered concentration to wide-open satyr-like glee. His habit of grinning sideways up at a listener gives Sellars something of W.C. Fields’ crafty twinkle, but his basic image and rhythms are those of a bright child filled with exuberant feeling. More subtly—and not just because he sometimes affects Japanese dress—there is also an oriental quality to Sellars, a lightness and restraint that gives his playfulness irony and keeps it from being too personal or exhausting. He is, in the words of one of his company, “our delicate master.”

Sellars’ verbal style is a send-up of show-biz talk spiced with such enthusiastic punctuations as: “Fab! Absolutely fab!,” or “Shall we try a little ‘Magic of the Theatre’ on that one?” His voice has a slight nasal twang that he uses for comic effect. When he says the Italian word for heaven—“cielo” (tchay-low)—as if it rhymes with “Jello,” the whole company has a good hoot. “How should it be pronounced?” Sellars asks in mock innocence, but he leaves it to Craig Smith—“Mr. European, direct from the Musiksaalverein”—to set the pronunciation. Sellars does not try to imitate it. His sure use of foreign languages, along with a
consistent refusal to change himself in speaking them, suggests an important characteristic of his work. His eclectic style is built on an interplay of independent ideas, each holding its own on equal terms without being fused or transformed. Sellars’ unpretentiousness also fosters a strong sense of individuality in the company. Because his ideas come not as statements, but as playful ad-libs, his actors never seem to be parroting Sellars when they try out his suggestions. He does not hesitate to make specific demands, to say, “I need this there,” or “I could use more of that here.” Even so, his manner invites his actors to respond in their own ways, on equal terms, not so much transformed by Sellars’ ideas as provoked by them. “He always listens and takes what you think into account,” says soprano and ten-year Sellars veteran Susan Larson, “just like Captain Kirk on ‘Star Trek’” (1988).

Sellars rehearses sequentially to find out how ideas get shaped by action, and to see what sense his actors make as the story unfolds. He jokes that an early run-through will be “a mush-through” so that his actors will feel free to follow what comes up rather than sticking to what was planned. Meanwhile, as if to remind everyone that there is an overall concept, scenic blueprints for all four acts are fixed to the wall beside the stage manager’s table and she has outlined them in different colored tapes on the floor. “We’re in the red lines in this act,” stage manager Keri Muir calls to an actor who has crossed over into the wrong marks. “Oh look,” laughs Sellars, “Ms. Muir has done our groundplans in the colors of the French flag. How appropriate!”

But the designs for this production are not set in Beaumarchais’ France, nor in the opera’s Spanish locale. Sellars and his designer Adrienne Lobel have chosen New York’s Trump Tower as the setting, and costume designer Dunya Ramicova will dress the characters accordingly. “I think we have our own feudal empire,” Sellars will later explain to NBC’s Garrick Utley. “There is still the remnants of this ancient class structure, but it’s drawn along different lines now. What’s interesting for me is to do an essay on contemporary American life but to have to do it through the prism of an 18th-century opera” (NBC News: 1987). True to his eclectic style, Sellars wants the opera set in New York, but sung in the original Italian. His anachronistic treatment of classic works—like his drug-culture Don Giovanni, Cosi Fan Tutte set in a diner, and this Trump Tower Figaro—often deflects attention from Sellars’ deeper originality. Within the jazzy irreverence lives a complex and knowledgeable grasp of the work, and a sure sense of how the feelings, values, and ideas of another time and culture relate to our own.

The ground plan for one rehearsal I observed is a case in point. Act I takes place in Susanna’s room which, conventionally, would be the theatricalized servant’s quarters of an 18th-century palace. If we have never seen such a palace—or perhaps even if we had—its theatrical recreation might not convey much useful information about Susanna’s situation. A period setting might have a stylish charm for a modern audience but would blur the class conflicts on which the opera depends. If that same space is a laundry maid’s room squeezed into a New York highrise, we begin to get the important values. An ironing board and rubber gloves suggest the grungy underside of luxury, and the foldout sofa bed which opens to fill the entire room symbolizes the double-duty life of Susanna and Figaro where knowing how to bend, fold, or even disappear are matters of everyday survival. Socially and economically, we know where we are in the Trump Tower, and so do the actors. “Time for knucklehead
to enter,” Sellars razzes Jim Maddalena, who—as the Count—has just come through the wrong taped “door” line on the floor. “Yeah, but I’m rich,” the Count-actor jokes back, telling us he knows exactly where the important lines in this setting are, and who can cross them. He can.

Often, when Sellars calls for a strong physical position or realistic behavior, his actors will feign operatic temperament. “What, sing from here? But what about my voice?” “This isn’t the way the London recording does it!” “Am I going to get an acoustical panel back here so I can be heard?” “Hold it. Did Mozart approve of this change?” In such banter, as well as in the ideas the cast brings to rehearsal, one can see that Sellars’ physically demanding approach to performance makes his actors feel good; taken seriously, it makes them peers and not at all the prima donnas they pretend to be. Most of Sellars’ company and management staff work with him regularly. Since he cannot afford to pay them between projects, this involves considerable sacrifice, including juggling other job offers. To work with Sellars is a choice, one that turns many of them away from the established world of opera—the “Big Career”—and toward this smaller, more chancey, if also more exciting kind of work. In their youthful, “we can do anything” spirit, Sellars sees the possibility of a new style of American opera:

This generation of American singers doesn’t want to be big, loud opera singers. Well, some of them want to be loud, but they are very aware of not wanting to be these sort of beached whales. This generation of American singers has seen what goes on at the Met and they don’t want to be that. They’d like to have that
salary, they'd like to be famous, but they don't want to look stupid. And most opera just looks so stupid, and most of this generation of singers are smart people, there is no reason for them to look stupid; they are perfectly interesting, smart people. When you start with that then the main task is just not—as rehearsals go on—to lower everyone's IQ [. . .] or start acting at a fairy-tale level of intelligence.

The first scene between Susanna and Figaro goes smoothly. At the opening, Susanna must stand on the back of the sofa to try on her wedding gown because there is no place else to stand while Figaro is measuring the open bed. Gradually, their interest in each other draws them together until both are standing on the sofa's back (see plate 4). As if by accident, they slide down into the bed for a moment of sexy fun. But when the sudden thought of the Count's schemes intrudes, Susanna leaves Figaro, takes off her gown, and stands at the ironing board holding her bride's dress before her. Figaro tries to joke about the threat they face, but Susanna doggedly dons her maid's uniform. She is facing the facts; will he? They reach a terrible impasse, a gaping pause in which they look at each other as though they are strangers. In a silence made total by the sudden absence of music, we see Susanna and Figaro thinking the

5. Susanna donning her apron, Act I. (Photo by Peter Krupenye)
unthinkable: Is he such a fool? Might she be playing around? Horrified, they rush back into an embrace as if to squeeze away the gap they felt between them.

Sellars is impressed. "Fab! That's just absolutely fab!" Almost no comments are made about the music because Craig Smith and the actors have worked the score through once today before putting the scene on its feet. A few eye contacts need to be worked out between conductor and singers, but that will come later, after the more fundamental timing of the emotional relationship has been developed. Sanford Sylvan who plays Figaro, and Jeanne Ommerlé as Susanna are superb musicians with impressive vocal technique and impeccable diction, but now they call upon their skills as actors. They like how the scene worked, but show it mostly by serious concern over the things that could be improved. Ommerlé wants to know if Dunya Ramicova can fix the sleeves of Susanna's wedding gown so that she can slip out of them fast enough to be standing only in her slip when she tells Figaro about the Count's advances. Jeanne likes a stripped-down quality for this moment in which Susanna discovers that her husband-to-be cannot face plain facts. "You know what I love about that veil, Jeannie?" Sellars asks. "That veil is so sweet and sad." She has been fingering it thoughtfully, and Sellars sees in her absorption a fragile sweetness that Susanna will have to fight to save. She nods, and without lifting her head shoots a reproachful look at her Figaro.

Before their moment of crisis, Sellars wants Susanna and Figaro to enjoy themselves fully, the better to set up the tension to come. So he improvises with the actors about that moment on the back of the sofa—encouraging them to come together almost as a joke but then, quickly, to catch the sexual fire that tumbles them into a heap on the bed. "It's sort of Fred and Ginger," he says as he thinks about that slide down into the bed. But he doesn't want Astaire and Rogers choreography because that would make it slick, or maybe just a send-up. A sense of abandon is what he is after, so he encourages the actors not to be too careful, not even to think about landing on the same spot simultaneously. "Do it like you were at home and just keep thinking it will come out right however it comes, and it will. Then no matter where you land you will be in the right place emotionally." For Sellars finding the right emotional line, rather than just the effective blocking, is what counts:

What's interesting is watching people react. You want people's genuine reactions. I don't want to tell them how to react because then they'll be doing my reaction, and that's never interesting. So I set up a situation which people are actually confronting [. . .]. My work is the situation, their work is reacting to it and living in it.

Despite Sellars' playful approach, the image of Figaro and Susanna falling is not a casual one: it is the first of an important series in which the characters of the opera, led by their deepest feelings, are taken to the edge of change and then—if they have courage and don't worry too much about logical details—tumble over into a new world of delight. Like Meyerhold, Sellars establishes significant gestures that capture the moral center of an action, and then he scores these gestures throughout the production like themes. This first falling precedes a sequence of rolling, tumbling, jumping, teetering, tottering, sliding, and collapsing that
will end only in the last act when all of the characters decide to jump, not suicidally off a 52nd story ledge, but joyfully into each other's arms. Sellars jokes about his "Miltonic obsession" with people falling, but his true inspiration is the text:

Everything in these Mozart-Da Ponte operas starts with this Dante-esque notion of original sin and of the fall. The words precipitare [precipitate] and cadere [fall] just are coming constantly [. . .]. In Figaro [they] are on virtually every page [. . .]. And of course falling is a profound idea, not only connected with some vertical notion of religious hierarchy and a kind of cosmic design, [. . .] but also falling in love.

The action of being hit and literally floored by strong feelings will gradually become the production's basic image of a shared humanity beyond class, a leveling that makes all of the characters one in our eyes long before they see that for themselves. At this point in rehearsal, the actors are still too busy coping with the details to get the full sense of letting go. They know where they are heading, and so in a sense do we. We may remember that playful tumbling into bed and how for a moment it made the claustrophobia of a servant's room disappear. Improvised letting go in the direction of a larger purpose might stand as one metaphor for Sellars' approach to his work.

If letting go is one key gesture in the Sellars Figaro, being trapped is its necessary complement. Within the cramped setting and the social order it implies, the characters get caught, stuck, cornered, boxed in, closeted, stuffed, squeezed, backed up against walls, splayed against windows, left hanging over edges, locked in or locked out of their deepest desires. Social entrapment is the underlying condition and it first appears clearly in Figaro's private response to the facts Susanna has laid before him: his solo cavatina "Se vuol ballare signor Contino?" ("So you want to dance, do you Mr. Count?"). When Susanna leaves, Figaro drops his amiable mask, and without it we sense the deep wound the count's plots have inflicted. Letting go here, Figaro would expose his pain, but he is unable to do so. Figaro flattens himself against a door and faces us blankly (see plate 8). He is trapped. Then without looking directly at it, he reaches for a guitar standing beside him. He handles it lightly and deftly, in strong contrast to his actual situation. His struggle to control his anger is very moving because of the artful finesse with which a man in Figaro's position must disguise his actions.

This brief passage has many levels which Sellars and Sanford Sylvan as Figaro explore with the assurance of experienced coworkers. They listen to each other, make quiet jokes, and call up past experiences in the vivid shorthand of friends. Sellars reminds Sylvan of their work with Linda Hunt on Mother Courage (1984) at the Boston Shakespeare Company, and especially how moved they were by Hunt's way of performing "The Song of the Great Capitulation." Figaro's entrapment presents a similar need to face the politics of sexual exploitation without giving in or giving up. Thanks to Linda Hunt, and Sellars' friendship with Sylvan, a gritty touch of Brecht will texture this moment of Mozart. "Figaro has no place to go with his anger," Sellars reflects, as if seeing it clearly for the first time. "That's the whole point."

Sometimes Sellars' loose and easy workshop method hits a snag and
6. The rejected Count (James Maddalena) and his flunky, Basilio (Frank Kelley) are about to make Susanna kiss Cherubino (Susan Larson). (Photo by Peter Krupenyk)

7. The Count makes his move on Susanna while Cherubino eavesdrops. (Photo by Peter Krupenyk)

8. Figaro with his back to the wall. (Photo by Peter Krupenyk).
he has to resort to more traditional directorial assertions. Later in this scene the Count’s open humiliation of Figaro produces a messy moment in rehearsal. The Count has shown he can do anything he likes with Susanna by ordering his cousin Cherubino to kiss her while Figaro watches helplessly. Sellars wants the insult of that kiss to motivate Figaro’s subsequent aria, “Non piú andrai” (“I can’t go on”), in which ironic praise of Cherubino’s recruitment in the Count’s regiment is really an attack on the Count himself. The idea makes sense, but Sellars has problems getting everyone to work it out. Figaro keeps forgetting his blocking and needs to be cued. Cherubino is having trouble with line sequence and a painful elbow injury. The dynamics of the music seem off and Craig Smith calls for a quick sing-through. The stage manager has been called to the phone just before the actors start flubbing and calling for lines. Through these cross currents Sellars is trying to focus the underlying rage of an otherwise comic scene. But everyone is distracted by nagging details that will not fall into place. Sellars is amazingly patient. There is no temperament nor any struggle to dominate. He stands in the center of the space, suspended halfway through a move, gathering the details until his actors are ready to hear him. In its own restrained way, it is a demonstration of directorial confidence and control.

At last it is his turn and Sellars moves into action, becoming for just a few minutes the Figaro he wants us to imagine. He does not get so lost in acting, however, that he forgets to ask Craig Smith about the music. “I can’t tell whether the tempo here will build his rage or undercut it.” The conductor thinks it will build it and makes a note in his score about the weight to emphasize in the cadence of this passage. Sellars goes on with his improvisation to see how the acting and the music will balance. “What’s the matter?” he asks in Figaro’s voice of the other characters who have watched the kiss. “Aren’t you having any fun?” Sellars lets us see how quickly Figaro turns his anger into a weapon with a gesture that suddenly prevents the Count from leaving. In Sellars’ version, the Count is forced to stay and watch Figaro insult him, instead of exiting as in the text. The real audience Figaro is playing to, however, is Susanna, whose confidence he must regain by showing her that when it comes to underhanded moves, Figaro is the real master.

“Ooooh! Look at the nice hightops!” Sellars coos as he sneakily unties Cherubino’s laces. Then, a hockey stick is slammed riflescope against Cherubino’s side, an imaginary moustache is at first playfully tugged, then viciously ripped off. “Why isn’t everyone having fun?” the mocking director/character calls as he half lounges on the open sofa bed. The Count looks ready to explode, and the other characters, too, are dumbfounded that Figaro is going so far—and getting away with it. Then suddenly Figaro leaps up, grabs a garbage pail, and begins to toss the garbage in the Count’s direction in imitation of a cannonade to military glory. Sellars wants to include raw eggs. A stage manager, Larry Geddes, rolls his eyes and makes a note.

The improvised sketch continues for almost a minute, and parts of it are repeated three times more. Again, it is not the staging Sellars is concerned with; it is the underlying emotional structure he wants to probe. Everyone is struck by it, but not in the usual way actors are awed by a virtuoso director. He is not performing nor being definitive. He is trying to find the inner voice of Figaro in recognizable 1988 accents, trying to bring its flavor here and now into this room, asking his company to catch
its feeling, hear its tone, make it their own. Nevertheless, Sellars knows actors are not puppets, and that there is a risk in attempting what only they can do:

Performers have a special territory, a domain which must be reserved for their use only. You can’t intrude there. You just have to [...] create a structure that keeps them inside some reactive state in which every night they can genuinely notice something in themselves and feel it, rather than go through an emotion, or artificially remember and reconstruct. The American version of the Stanislavski method of relying on memory constantly is not very interesting because you want people actually living it in the moment.

Still, as Sellars sets up this situation, there is no mistaking his own passion, and one of the actresses pays it ironic tribute: “I can’t wait to see all that,” she grins. Sellars grins too, but then he calls for the scene.

At first, the real Figaro blows it because he is trying too hard and feeling the pressure. “Wait a minute, wait a minute,” he says, “I’m playing too much attitude here and I don’t even know what I’m supposed to be doing. Why do I go up here? Oh, yeah, Frank [Frank Kelley, who plays the Count’s flunky, Basilio], I haven’t been up to Frank yet. And then I—what?” “Start where Jim goes for the door and you stop him,” Sellars suggests. “Right.” The scene is rehearsed twice more, each time getting more of the suppressed anger that has gradually worked its way through the whole of this act. Then Figaro sees how he gets everyone in the scene—especially Susanna—to listen to him, not just to what he is saying, but to the real idea that cannot be said, only grasped. It is what happened in the rehearsal when Sellars made the whole company experience the emotional essence of the scene through his attempts to sketch it for them. That takes time and Sellars is willing to wait for the right moment, and to act when it comes. Meanwhile, by the scene’s end, Figaro turns to Susanna as if to ask, “Well, how did I do, baby?” The slow embrace she gives him tells us that the gap between them is gone for good, or at least until the next act.

Sellars often speaks of taking the work deeper, of finding more levels. For this reason his productions tend to develop so radically over time that he wonders aloud if an observer like me will even recognize anything from one set of rehearsals to the next. Often he himself cannot remember where a good idea came from, or out of what context it grew, because the surround will have changed so completely from the moment when the idea was born. A layered, open-ended search for meaning is taken for granted in criticism, philosophy, and science, but it is a risky business in theatre where tight schedules and even tighter budgets make fixed goals and predetermined solutions the norm. One strategy Sellars uses to avoid the trap of a prepackaged production is to surround his work with a show of amateur informality, to feature what cannot be fixed, and to accept unevenness as a preferable alternative to instant mechanical perfection. In his restless and sometimes awkward probing for new possibilities, Sellars questions not just an opera like Figaro, but the very process of producing it in the theatre. To witness a Sellars production is an active experience in which spectators are encouraged to notice not only what the production is doing, but also what it fails to do, cannot do, chooses to avoid doing.
Sellars' work signals its choices through undisguised discrepancies between the text and its anachronous performance, as well as between serious moments and send-ups, realism and subjective poetry, elegant execution and simple plaindealing. For Sellars, this discord captures the texture of real life:

You are walking down the street and eight transistor radios are playing and fifteen little dramas are playing themselves out. You may have caught a little snippet of one of them and then three others went by and you didn't even notice. That is what it is actually like in this world—not this Aristotelian one-thing-happens-at-a-time situation. We live in a world that is about simultaneity and contradiction, and that even while one gesture is being made somewhere else, or maybe the same place, a completely opposite gesture is made... There are no single gestures anymore, every gesture is multifaceted or surrounded by enough other gestures that it no longer means the same thing, and has to be considered in an interdependent mode.

To some, Sellars' all-gestures-on-the-table approach is distractingly self-conscious—a kind of showing off. But his style has the virtue of preserving the integrity of an opera or play by clearly distinguishing it from its patently invented production. Moreover, Sellars' abrupt shifts in context reflect an important characteristic of his theatre in which the realities of contemporary life and the invention of poetic imagination coexist, not in romantic fusion or classical balance, but in zany and provocative juxtaposition. He avoids a homogenized blend of the real and the imaginary that might rob either view of its unique savor. In the same way, he refuses to favor one point of view above the other so as not to fall into flat literalness or sentimental effusion. Sellars chooses a path right up the middle where the tension between the actual and the poetic sends out the liveliest sparks. His rehearsals for Act III of *Figaro* capture this charged center of his work, and show him balancing his instincts for factual necessity and inventive freedom.

The setting for Act III is the principal room of the Count's duplex.
“It’s the most enormously spacious set of the whole show,” Sellars explains, “and it comes after two claustrophobically small settings for Acts I and II.” After the first act in Susanna’s cramped bedroom-laundry, we move in the second to the countess’s bedroom, which is also “pathetically small.” A slab of a bed, a “nothing love seat,” and a wall of mirrored closets creates a feeling of chic impersonality that aptly reflects the emptiness of her private world. But the main space of the duplex features an almost 30-foot-high balcony, a spiral staircase, a vast wall of windows overlooking the city, and a huge Frank Stella–like abstract painting that dominates the wall beneath the balcony. The room is showy but there is almost no place to sit except for two enormous, rough metal “art” chairs of thronelike proportions. “Neanderthal” is how Sellars describes them. “It’s all very haute moderne, of course,” Sellars adds with a nasal twang.

The actors do a brief run-through of the opening scene in which Susanna tricks the Count into a rendezvous that is actually a trap. It seems simple enough—they sit on the “art” chairs, Susanna flirts, the Count falls for it, and it all fits the sprightly music. Sellars compliments the actors but he does not find the scene interesting enough. “You people were fabulous, but it’s too easy. It’s like a tea party where maybe all that’s at stake is a couple of scones. Let’s see if we can make it harder.” He crosses into the space scratching his head, one hand on hip, looking
at the floor while he thinks out loud. "Let's use this wall for the one at
the bottom of the staircase," he says pointing to a real wall at the back
of the rehearsal space. As usual, an actual physical situation is integral to
what Sellars sees as the psychology of a moment. He needs a real wall
against which the Count will pin Susanna, making clear that the ongoing
theme of entrapment cuts two ways—the tricked seducer will trap the
seductress. Flirting with her back to the wall will not be easy for Susanna,
and as Sellars places her in position, the actress feels behind her with one
hand as if to gauge what room remains in which to maneuver. Like
Figaro in Act I she is trapped and will need artful finesse to outwit the
Count. Sellars places the Count beside her in a leaning pose that is casually
threatening. She is partially pinned down already but cannot say so. As
the musical dialog begins, Sellars suggests that the Count slide to his
knees until he can place his whole head up under Susanna's apron, nuzzling
her crotch. She has no place to move. It is at once a cruel and comic
image. "Well," Sellars shrugs by way of lightening the atmosphere for
his actors, "they call this dramma giocoso (literally, 'smiling drama'), so
let's go."

Sellars' intention is not to be novel or gratuitously provocative. As he
sees it, Susanna needs strong justification for the plea of forgiveness she
whispers to her absent Figaro later in the scene. By allowing the Count's
aroused and kinky sexuality, Sellars has found that justification. Susanna's
temptation of the Count is no longer a tea party. All the little shifts in
the music between her no's and yes's that before seemed pure coquettish-
ness now convey a conflict between her revulsion and her need to string
the Count along. As we read this conflict in her face and hear it in her
voice, we also catch a hideous visual pun—the Count's head making
Susanna already appear grotesquely pregnant (see plate 10).

Realism, however, is never Sellars' sole objective. Minutes later when
the Count is left alone to sing about his suspicions that Susanna may
indeed be duping him, the whole production shifts gears radically. With-
out any apparent motivation, the Count drops to the floor so swiftly it
appears as if the actor has had an accident. But no, he goes on singing as
he crawls, writhes, rolls, and slides backward across the floor as if rowing
(see plate 11). Somehow it all fits the music and might even seem some
extreme expression of his twisted inner feelings. But it is not what the
production has led us to expect in the Trump Tower, let alone in Mozart.
This provocative shift into the extraordinary is as much Sellars' style as
his respect for the factual. What looks like a mistake is an intentional
unplugging of what spectators take for granted. The audience is about to
enter one of those secret worlds Sellars loves to uncover—what he some-
times calls "the actual"—where the shock upon entering shatters passive
watching.

Sellars is perfectly aware of the risks. "People don't expect this of us.
We don't usually crawl around on the floor—except in Handel, right?"
He's joking with his actors while he works on the gestures of the Count's
torment. "This completely breaks the fabric of everything up till now.
It's all been just people and believable, and now this. People will be
shocked. But, the aria calls for it." When contemporary human experi-
ence is not Sellars' guide, the poetic idea within the musical text is. He
works with the actor to choreograph the realistic content of the Count's
paranoia within a more stylized frame. "We'll make it as real as possible,"
he says, then whispers conspiratorily, "but we'll all know it's EXPRES-
11. Without any apparent motivation, the Count drops to the floor, singing as he crawls, writhes, and slides across the floor. (Photo by Peter Kupeny)

SIONISM!" What Sellars and his actor establish are small clues that the Count might be falling because he missed his seat, or rolling across the floor to hide. These gestures connect the Count's nightmare experience to the actual world without flattening it into the ordinary. What is happening to him is not ordinary, and Sellars wants us to share this moment when the inner and outer worlds of experience collide and coexist.

Only later, during the three weeks of performance at Summerfare, will Sellars find the right balance in this scene between objective and subjective experience. He is aided enormously by his lighting designer, James F. Ingalls, who creates an overall visual progression from the clarity of morning in Acts I and II, to dreamlike night vision in Acts III and IV. As the characters who are trapped by rational scheming in the first half of the action become captive to their emotions in the second, the lighting reflects that change. Act III, cast in a burning coral light of sunset, is the visual turning point of the action, and the emotional pivot of the concept. Even with the telescope he uses at the start of the act, the Count cannot make out what is going on because the real action has moved inward where he cannot see it. His feelings take over, rolling him out, and making him crawl like everyone else.

By the end of the third act, Sellars can move us wholly into the subjective plane without worrying that we will get lost. As the Count's abused wife and Susanna plot to trap him in another rendezvous, they compose a letter of assignation. Sellars and his actors realize this moment as a lyrical exchange, a patterned dance about the rapture of romantic yearn-
ing. The Countess and Susanna alternately sing the phrases "song on the breeze . . . gentle zephyr . . . we'll sigh tonight . . . 'neath the pines in the copse," as the actors float, fall, tumble, and rest in complete harmony with the words, the music, and one another until they spill onto the floor in perfect parallel. Then from literal mimicry of text comes a wider blending that makes the Countess and Susanna seem first united as women, and then united as an image of women in love, and finally united as a single being who is at once breeze and the cheek that feels it; zephyr and the heart that feels like one; piney forest and the body that yearns to be held within it. As the two women bend and fall in the last light of day, text and feeling, idea and passion seem so closely tracked that there is the momentary illusion that they are one thing: the yearning of love personified.

Such choreographed passages are a signature of Sellars' work and grow from deep roots in his experience—years of watching the work of George Balanchine, encountering the rich expressiveness of American Sign Language at the National Theater for the Deaf, and investigating the hand gestures of Pacific Island dances. But the rich tradition of what Sellars calls "this gestural vocabulary" only came fully into focus as Sellars responded to the musical insights of Craig Smith:

Through working that vocabulary, one began to allow subject matter in theatre that was not exclusively emotional in content; there became another way to put forward content, or advance an argument, that at the same time allowed an actor to be part of a structure as well as an emotional being, and that also allowed, if you will, a very specific musical underpinning to be concretized visually. So it really did become an issue of sitting down with Craig Smith who would say, "You know, this chord in this aria comes up again in the second act over here. Can you make something that visually connects those two moments?" And I could, which was wonderful.

What Sellars and his company are doing, then, are not modern updates of classic works. They are creating complex approximations of the originals in contemporary terms. In an ordinary update, a classic work is reduced rather cynically to the limits of what the modern world sees and knows. In more traditional revivals a pure vision from the past may impress us, but leave us standing outside its idealized perfection in awe and disbelief. In a Sellars approximation we and the work stand face to face, eye to eye, so that each may recognize, touch, be pushed and shoved, embraced or held by the other. Potential violence may be done when we are such equals, misunderstandings are inevitable, but so too are synchronous moments of spiritual perception. To create such moments is what Peter Sellars and his company are all about.³

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes by Sellars are from this May 1989 interview.

2. For a parallel but distinctly different attempt to distinguish the polarities of Sellars' style, see Michael Merschmeier's article, "An Interview with Peter Sellars on the Kinship of Art, Theater and Contemporary History" (1987:16–23).

3. I am deeply grateful to Felicia Londre who suggested the idea for this article, and Laurence J. Geddes who made my being at rehearsals possible.
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TDRreading

Also see Trousdell’s “Giorgio Strehler in Rehearsal,” 1986 vol. 30, no. 4 (T112). There have been many other articles in TDR over the years concerned with directing. We call your attention to only a few of them: Stanislavski’s “Director’s Diary, 1905,” 1964 vol. 9, no. 1 (T25), Elia Kazan, “‘Look, There’s the American Theatre’” (interview), 1964 vol. 9, no. 2 (T26), and the Rehearsal Procedures issue, 1974 vol. 18, no. 2 (T62).