



A captive audience

By **Antonia Couling**

Bel Canto stars Julianne Moore as an opera singer at the heart of a tense hostage situation. In advance of the film's UK cinema release this month, *Opera Now* discovered the real voice behind the fictional character on screen

Ann Patchett's 2001 bestselling novel *Bel Canto* was made into a film in 2018 and is released in the UK this April. Julianne Moore plays opera singer Roxane Coss, who has been booked to perform at a private birthday party for Japanese industrialist Mr Hosokawa (Ken Watanabe) in a fictional Latin American country. Soon after the opera singer has begun her recital, the house is invaded by guerilla rebels and a long-playing hostage situation ensues. Slowly, a connection between captors and captives develops. Languages are shared and taught, meals are cooked and eaten together and music is appreciated, specifically that of the voice of Roxane – sung by Renée Fleming on the film's soundtrack.

Fleming has had a long association with the book and its author and it has been generally accepted that the character in the book was modelled on her. Current information even states that Patchett came to Fleming for advice while writing the book. *Opera Now* can set the record straight, however, as Fleming explains during our interview: 'For so many years people thought Roxane was me, which turns out not to be true, but it's a good story! I didn't meet Ann until after the book came out. I was introduced to her through Mary Jo Heath, a senior radio producer for the Met. She was the one who told me about *Bel Canto* [the book]. Mary Jo had a digital classical show at the time called *Get Music* and she interviewed Ann



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and asked her if she would like to meet me. So we got together in the little cafeteria at the Metropolitan Opera and have been great friends ever since.'

The book has also had an incarnation as an opera, by composer Jimmy López with libretto by Nilo Cruz, which premiered at the Lyric Opera of Chicago in the 2015/16 season. The production would never have come into being were it not for Fleming's role as Creative Consultant at the Lyric and her suggestion of the book as a basis for a new work. 'I thought it would make a good opera. It's an ensemble piece with a lot of interesting characters and roles and of course at the centre was both the power of art and the power of opera and the voice. So I thought, there's a great theme for an opera house. All of Ann's books in essence find the central humanity in people. And at some point in them you really think human beings are not all bad. I love that and I'm drawn to her books for that reason.'

With this long-standing close association with the book, you can't help wondering if Fleming was involved in bringing the story to the screen. 'People assumed I had the rights of the book! You would not believe the list of people who approached me – Richard Eyre, Miloš Forman, Joel Schumacher, Meryl Streep, Mike Nichols, Scot Rudin ... Michael Eisner, who was the head of Disney said "I have to make that into a movie" and I said "Well, I'm sorry to tell you that I don't have >

Opposite page: Julianne Moore as Roxane with Ken Watanabe as her ardent admirer. Above: Putting the power of opera to the test. Left: Renée Fleming – 'I wouldn't have been very happy had someone else sung the character!'

Right: A scene from *Bel Canto* the opera, by Jimmy López, commissioned by the Lyric Opera of Chicago at Renée Fleming's suggestion



the rights". I wish I had them!' But producer Caroline Baron got in there first, thanks to a chance meeting with Patchett during a signing, shortly after the book came out. And Fleming's association continues, with her stunning vocals providing not only the sung parts of Julianne Moore's character, but also featuring on the outstanding film score by David Majzlin. 'I wouldn't have been very happy had someone else sung the character – let's put it that way!' she admits.

Naturally, the portrayal of an opera singer presents quite a few challenges for an actor, but Fleming was also on hand to help Moore come to grips with certain aspects of the role. 'I recorded almost everything for that film live, so Julianne came to the recording sessions and sat about five feet from me so she could really watch what my mouth does and how I look when I'm singing. She also came to watch a rehearsal of something that I did and saw a performance at the Met. She really immerses herself in the world.

'No actor has the musculature that opera singers develop over time, but they can do their best to create something that looks reasonably authentic. In the end it's not a small thing, because Julianne had to learn by rote the Italian and Czech and all of that takes a lot of time, especially for someone who's never done it before. Actors are really extraordinary in their willingness to take on these kinds of challenges.'

Many classical music-based novels come across as rather arch and at pains to display the author's knowledge of the genre. Patchett's book swerves this

pitfall, with close observation of character and the unfolding drama, so that Mr Hosokawa's all-consuming love for opera, which leads us into the story, becomes an accepted reality for the audience. This is reflected well in the film (directed by Paul Weitz), which is wistfully poignant and powerfully moving. It almost seems a privilege to be eavesdropping on the developing relationships between the adversaries within the hostage mansion and the little world of sanity that grows there. Softly, the story draws you in so that you dare to hope that music may be the answer.

Although Moore is excellent as Roxane, her musical performances don't always look convincing. Opera singers use their whole body to sing, even when they are standing still, and it's a tall order for someone to display that inner resonance unless they are in fact singing. Ken Watanabe as Mr Hosokawa is totally believable as a deeply civilised man who has enormous veneration for the art of opera and for the woman who sings it. There are strong performances too from Ryo Kase as the multilingual translator who displays open wonder at the possibilities of love; and from Maria Mercedes, who subtly and successfully portrays her character Carmen's discovery that there are more dimensions to her life than she knew existed.

Majzlin's soundtrack is beautiful and worth listening to in its own right. Flickering Japanese hints pulse occasionally through a mainly latin-inflected score, using guitar, electronic music and a Canary Islands guitar-like instrument called a timple. All this, shot through with gentle bursts of meandering vocalising by Renée Fleming, makes for a haunting accompaniment that never obscures the beauty of the opera excerpts that we are treated to. **ON**

Bel Canto is on general release in UK cinemas from 26 April

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