Opera and Personality Problems

Some lessons for Practicing Clinicians
Overview

• Lessons
• Opera, badness and madness
• What can we learn from Opera?
• La Bohème
  o Rodolfo and Mimi
  o Musetta
  o Mimi’s illness
  o Mimi’s death
• More learning
• Learning points summary
Lessons

• The Zeitgeist of business
• Models from business, manufacturing and profit generation applied to healthcare
• Without too much adaptation these models are applied in health
• So why not look at opera?
Opera, Badness and Madness

- Many grand opera’s have dramatic stories about badness and madness:
  - Otello
    - Psychopathy, morbid jealousy and murder
  - Lucia di Lammermoor
    - Hate, murder, suicide
  - Billy Budd
    - Betrayal of innocence, guilt and redemption
  - Carmen
    - The naughty girl with a good heart

Henck van Bilsen, St. Andrew’s,
hvanbilsen@standrew.co.uk
Mad Scenes in Opera
What can we learn from Opera?

- Lessons from **PERFORMING** opera’s
  - More later….
- Lessons from the operatic stories
  - Many opera’s contain (un)intentional lessons on life as well as helpful hints for practicing mental health clinicians.
  - Let’s review *La Bohème*
La bohème

- **La bohème** is an opera in four acts, by Giacomo Puccini.

- **Main players:**
  - Rodolfo, a poet
  - Mimì, a seamstress
  - Marcello, a painter
  - Musetta, a singer
  - Schaunard, a musician
  - Colline, a philosopher
  - Benoît, their landlord
Act 1

• The story is set in Paris in the period around 1830.
• Marcello, Rodolfo, Colline and Schaunard decide they will all celebrate his good fortune (having earned some money) by dining at Cafe Momus instead.
• Rodolfo remains alone for a moment in order to finish an article he is writing, promising to join his friends soon. There is a knock at the door, and Mimi, a seamstress who lives in another room in the building, enters. Her candle has blown out, and she has no matches; she asks Rodolfo to light it. She thanks him, but returns a few seconds later, saying she has lost her key. Both candles are extinguished; the pair stumble in the dark. Rodolfo, eager to spend time with Mimi, finds the key and pockets it, feigning innocence. In two arias (Rodolfo's Che gelida manina – "What a cold little hand" and Mimi's Sì, mi chiamano Mimi – "Yes, they call me Mimi"), they tell each other about their different backgrounds.
Lesson 1

• Rodolfo: ‘So wait here, Miss, and I’ll tell you who I am’ (24.40)
Learning points

• Even when you are completely in the dark you can find something of value (happiness)
• Keep an open mind, even if you have found what you were looking for....
• Delusions aren’t all bad
  o ‘I have the soul of a millionaire’
• It is better to lead a life worth suffering for then to try and avoid all suffering in life
Act 3

• At dawn by a tavern on the snowy outskirts of Paris, Mimì wanders in, searching for the place where Marcello and Musetta now live. When Marcello emerges, she tells him of her distress over Rodolfo’s incessant jealousy (Duet: “O buon Marcello, aiuto!”). She says she believes it is best that they part. When Rodolfo appears from the tavern, Mimì hides nearby, though Marcello thinks she has gone. Rodolfo tells Marcello that he wants to separate from his sweetheart, citing her fickleness; pressed for the real reason, he breaks down, saying that her coughing can only grow worse in the poverty they share; he’s desperately afraid she will die from her illness. (the following clip is from this scene).
Lesson 3

• Mimi’s illness (1.06): ‘..and sometimes at night I sense him trying to spy on my dreams..’
Learning points

• Bad behaviour can have very noble reasons
• And if people don’t communicate honestly that results in trouble
• If you think someone is BS-ing you, tell them so (in a kind and firm manner)
  o Marcello to Rodolfo: ‘You are not being honest with me’.
• Sometimes it is too difficult to say what we want/need and we say or do the opposite...
Opera and Treatment of Personality Problems

• Both deal with madness, badness and their implications
• Both are doing what they do for the impact they have on others (the public, the patients)
• Opera is an experience that only works well if all components work (are orchestrated!) well together: conductor, musicians, singers, what is on the stage e.g. All the elements of the ‘artistic milieu’ need to be in place.

Henck van Bilsen, St. Andrew’s, hvanbilsen@standrew.co.uk
Treatment of Personality Problems

• The ward environment needs to be a PPIMM: Psychologically and Psychotherapeutically Inspired Motivational Milieu
• Fine-tuning and calibrating of nursing staff interventions, medication interventions other therapeutic and recovery orientated interventions and the application of rules and regulations
• Risk Monitoring and management
• Health monitoring and management

Henck van Bilsen, St. Andrew's, hvanbilsen@standrew.co.uk
Assumption

- In the treatment of personality problems (likewise for the treatment of other mental health problems) competence, collaboration and timing are supposed to work to the desired effect WITHOUT TOO MUCH TRAINING OR REHEARSAL (exception perhaps perhaps DBT)
- Pivotal interaction moments between staff and patients are happening in an unplanned and unprepared manner (when is the last time you rehearsed how to interact with a patient)
- We assume that we will be able to translate our (no doubt noble) intentions into a desirable effect on the patient
Opera

• Opera directors know that intentions do not guarantee effect
• Practice, rehearsal, testing a variation of performances result in the final performance that is shown to the public
• But even then, changes are still being made...
Opera/Psychiatry is a success when

- There is sufficient **Practice** (by all involved in the performance) before the actual performance
- When there is **clear leadership** at crucial moments (it is not a democracy....)
- Where performers **stick to their roles** (the conductor does not hand over his conducting to the soprano)
- Where the action results in **real and actual experienced meaning** (statistics never cured a patient/a perfect sung song is deadly boring)
- **Perfect performances are seldom a success** (optimal dosage effect)
References

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