

Elysium Between Two Continents Presents The Thirtieth Annual Erwin Piscator Award

A review by Nino Pantano
published in Opera-L, April 10, 2017

On the afternoon of Thursday, March 30th, Elysium Between Two Continents Presented The Thirtieth Annual Erwin Piscator Award at the intimate and elegant Lotos Club in New York City. This program is to benefit Elysium's International Educational Programs "Art and Education without Borders." The Lotos Club gathering that afternoon evoked memories of a musical soiree at the Kennedy White House when President Kennedy said it was "the most illustrious gathering of intellects since Thomas Jefferson dined alone."

Movers and shakers notwithstanding, the "big bang" theory goes back to 1985 when Gregorij H. von Leitis instituted the Erwin Piscator (1893-1966) award honoring Erwin Piscator's artistic and humanitarian legacy and his lasting influence on theater on both sides of the Atlantic. Piscator was convinced that "art achieves its purpose only when it contributes to the improvement of man."

The interesting program booklet included greetings from Dr. Kerstin Weinbach, City Councilor and Head of the Cultural Department for the Magistrate City of Marburg, March 2017. The letter announced a newly opened cultural institution bearing the name Erwin Piscator Haus. Piscator went to school in Marburg and returned there in 1951. The new building replacing an older one proudly bears his name and continues his work.

After the wine and cocktail reception, the program began with soprano Jeannie Im singing "An die Freude" (Ode to Joy) music by Franz Schubert from a text by Friedrich Schiller. Ms. Im has been with Elysium since 2000 and was in the premiere performance of Ernst Krenek's "What Price Confidence" at the Teatro dell' Opera di Roma co-produced by Elysium. Among her many performances under the auspices of Elysium, were concerts of works by performers who were exiled or killed in World War II. Matthew Lobaugh, who is the Music Director of the New York City Wide Youth Opera, was her versatile piano accompanist. Ms. Im strolled through the tables and sang in a clear commanding soprano with joyful abandon.

Michael Müller, the Mayor of Berlin had his representative, Ms. Katja Weisbrock Donovan, who is the head of Cultural Affairs at the German Consulate in New York, bring greetings and speak of the cooperation of the two cities - Berlin and New York. She mentioned the Kellen family who were forced to flee Berlin during the era of the Nazis and the importance of Erwin Piscator and Maria Ley Piscator to the world. The New York Theatre Workshop founded by James C. Nicola was a pivotal influence as well. Michael Lahr was the key to this joint effort of the two countries under the banner of art and enlightenment. The dream turned into a reality of Gregorij H. von Leitis and Michael Lahr.

The welcome was given by Gregorij H. von Leitis who truly was monarch of all he surveyed. His cherubic demeanor could not disguise his tremendous commitment to evoke the theme of peace and justice through art. Mr. von Leitis then proudly introduced the chairperson of the luncheon committee, Louise Kerz Hirschfeld, whose late beloved husband Al Hirschfeld, was the Da Vinci of caricaturists. Ms. Hirschfeld's energetic defense of the arts and its importance to all, made one think of "The Line King" a wonderful, whimsical documentary of her late great husband.

A fascinating musical excerpt followed, colorfully sung by soprano Jeannie Im "Lied von der Tünche" (Song of Whitewash) with music by Hanns Eisler and a text by Bertolt Brecht. The music evoked the German cabaret offerings of Lotte Lenya and the school of cabaret in the style of The Threepenny Opera. Matthew Lobaugh's facile accompaniment made the two, one.

The salad was served and now the "salad days" prevailed. Michael Lahr, the erudite and industrious Chairman of the Erwin Piscator Awards Committee spoke. As a specialist of Erwin Piscator, the founder of the political and epic theater, Lahr brilliantly curated the exhibit Erwin Piscator: Political Theater in Exile and it traveled to Bernried, New York, Catania, Salzburg and Munich. Lahr spoke of the great joy and importance of the occasion and introduced the famed playwright Tony Kushner.

Mr. Kushner alluded to the dark days we have been witnessing of late and how the arts will pave the way for better days ahead. He referred to an earlier era in Greenwich Village and elsewhere when Belafonte, Brecht and Brando championed causes and spread the word of enlightenment and creativity. They knew where they were going artistically and emotionally as did James Nicola in his early days at the studio, which has become a kind of mecca, a place "Where one can roll up in like a blanket" (Fanny). Tony Kushner spoke in staccato sentences like a prizefighter hammering away at the evils of the world and praising the good in his introduction for James C. Nicola.

Gregorij von Leitis made the presentation to James Nicola, "for his enormous contributions to the American theater by producing and cultivating artists whose works inspire and challenge the public." As Artistic Director of the New York Theater Workshop since 1988, Nicola has forged a unique community of theater artists, a group of writers, directors, designers and actors who form the core of NYTW's artist development activities. Many plays, premiers including Tony Kushner's "Angels in America" and "Homebody/Kabul" as well as Tennessee William's "A Streetcar Named Desire" were performed.

James Nicola spoke intimately and passionately about his boyhood desire to excel in theater and his lack of concentration on other subjects. Nicola's somewhat perturbed parents granted him the right to pursue his goals but he had to measure up academically to attain them. Nicola feels theater is "a sacred light" and that it illuminates the soul. Artists are encouraged to play their chosen destined roles. A force of nature illuminated by a "splendid torch," a force of nature not to be denied. James Nicola is motivated by a sacred flame and that light has brightened the world.

With so much at "stake" we proceeded to enjoy our delectable choice of steak (or salmon), having feasted on brilliant words and deeds from the hearts and minds of the mighty.

Vartan Gregorian is the 12th President of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, a grant making institution and is also a past honoree of the Erwin Piscator award. He is best known for his outstanding service as President of the New York Public Library. (1981-89) His services have earned him nearly 70 honorary degrees. The brilliant Mr. Gregorian spoke eloquently on behalf of honoree Marina Kellen French. With joyful abandon and as Robert Browning wrote "How do I love thee?" Mr. Gregorian alphabetically listed all of Marina Kellen French's virtues practically from "A to Z" and why she is so admired. Whether it be art, music, medical, literary, educational, she is there to lend support, advice and encouragement!

Gregorij von Leitis presented Marina Kellen French with the Erwin Piscator award "for so generously giving of her time and talent to support so many artistic, cultural and educational organizations both here in New York and in Berlin." Ms. French spoke of the joys of giving and that it must be earned and of her two unforgettable years as a student in Berlin, the land of her parents birth. The art of philanthropy and of aiding mankind is her mission." What good is leaving the earth with accumulated wealth but having done little or nothing to help ones' fellow humans?" That is also the mission of Gregorij von Leitis and Michael Lahr. That is the path chosen by Marina Kellen French. The honorary Erwin Piscator award of 2017 was in memory of Maria Ley Piscator. (1898-1999) In 2014, Ms. French was awarded the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany at the residence of the German Consul General Brita Wagener in New York City.

In a proclamation printed in the program, Governor Andrew Cuomo praised James C. Nicola for his "creative vision to American arts and culture" and Marina Kellen French "for her generous work in perpetuating and preserving a legacy of great art in the world." Mayor Bill de Blasio also congratulated the awardees and Elysium - between Two Continents in the program with a special proclamation.

Jeannie Im accompanied by Matthew Lobaugh sang a lively "Good-Bye Trouble" with music by Mischa Spoliansky and text by Frank Eyton. "I've put on my hat, I've locked up my flat; the dog's at the vets, I've settled my debts" and concluding with "And if I could design a world, I shouldn't plan a finer world." Ev'rything in it I see as it passes Thro' wonderful rose colored glasses. Good-bye Trouble! I've finished with you, Trouble!" With that special "Thank you for coming" from Louise Kerz Hirschfeld, the afternoon drew to a upbeat close as we were enjoying the desserts and sweets of the luncheon - almost redundant when one considers the real "sweets" offered by the words and deeds of the day!

Judy and I were happy to speak to many of the awardees and presenters. James Nicola and I share Italian heritage. His family were Piedmontese from Northern Italy, mine were Sicilian from the South. We laughed about the "rivalry" between Sicilians and non-Sicilians. Marina Kellen French is also on the Board of the Metropolitan Opera Guild. I mentioned the great tenor Enrico Caruso singing "Vecchia Zimarra" in "La Bohème", with the Met Opera on tour in Philadelphia when the bass, Andrés de Seguro lost his voice with the audience unaware. Caruso whispered to his friend, "turn your back to the audience and I'll sing it for you!" The mighty tenor made a recording of Colline's famous Coat aria at the insistence of the cast and his friends in 1916 - it is marked "Tenor-Bass."

Vartan Gregorian was affable and most gracious. He is the "Energizer battery" redux! Louise Kerz Hirschfeld spoke of her husband's zest for life and creative output. I told her that I especially admired his caricature of the matchless tenor Enrico Caruso (A former Lotos Club honoree in 1916) and the fact that Caruso, who caricatured as a hobby, published several volumes of caricatures. It was nice to chat with Jolana Blau, Vice Chairperson, who was also chatting with Martin Dvorak, Consul General of the Czech Republic in New York, Austrian Consul General Georg Heindl and his wife Neline Koornneef Heindl and the effervescent Midge Woolsey from both WQXR and PBS and her husband economist Dr. Jerry Stolt. Last year's honoree, President of the Licia Albanese-Puccini Foundation Sachi Liebergesell, was present with General Counsel Brian O' Connor Esq. and his wife Maura. The lovely intimate Lotos Club is a New York treasure and the perfect venue for this stellar occasion.

We wish to thank Gregorij H. von Leitis, President and Michael Lahr, Vice President for the pursuit of a peaceful world through art and artists and for being such gracious hosts and extraordinary humanitarians. As always, their friendship is treasured. If John Kennedy appreciated Thomas Jefferson dining alone, what about his being in a room full of people – men and women who match that ideal and are gregarious and fun as well.

I conclude with a quote from George Bernard Shaw that was referred to during this event, "You see things and you say, "Why?" But I dream things that never were and say, "Why Not?" Bravo to "Elysium - Between Two Continents for daring to ask "Why not?" and for keeping the work and spirit of Erwin Piscator and his wife Maria Ley Piscator alive, ongoing and thriving!

OPERA-L on Facebook:
<http://www.facebook.com/groups/25703098721/>