

MAD LUCY

Charlotte

I lost my voice when I was 23 singing Lucia in *Lucia di Lammermoor* at Texas Opera Theater. I know, you're thinking how could this woman ever be a coloratura soprano? Not with this voice (laughs huskily).

I loved opera...I still do. I read about how Maria Callas learned "Sempre libera" from the first act of Verdi's *La Traviata* and sang it on the radio...at the age of 13! And how soprano after soprano after soprano got their big break just waiting in the wings for someone's voice to give out! I mean, all you have to do is learn the role, and be standing there waiting, crouched like a 100-meter specialist waiting for the gun to go off. Or like a spider waiting for the web to vibrate. The average soprano has a predatory nature.

I lived for that moment. I thought: I am going to work as hard as I can and listen to every recording known to man of every role that is right for me – and some that I'll learn just because I can – I'll duplicate Tebaldi, Sutherland, Caballe, Stevens, and, of course, Callas. I'll learn every nuance, every roulade, every turn and trill and tuck and bend and jump and sway, and have at my disposal a palette of vocal colors to use at the drop of the first diva in round one.

The work paid off and I started singing everywhere. One night I was singing the mad scene in Lucia and I was really feeling high, feeling like Donizetti wrote this part for me, feeling insane with confidence. And my voice, oh my voice was like gold...pure gold with the Italian tripping off my tongue like a native. As I approached the high Eb at the end of the cadenza, I took a good, solid breath, visualizing the note exploding in a glory of angelic sound...nothing.

I suppose you can't say nothing because before the nothing was an almost imperceptible squeak...like Horton hearing the Whos' for the first time. Everyone was staring at me. I took another breath and tried the note again...this time absolutely nothing. Real nothing. Silence. Silencio. Niente.

The flute started playing again – the cadenza is with a flute did I tell you that? So I thought skip the high note and move on. I breathed. I sang...or tried. Nothing.

If this were a film, the camera would be pulling into a close up of my face while it seemed like the background was moving farther and farther away. Oh, and strident, atonal music...

I can laugh now, but at the time everything ground to a horrifying halt. And I looked at the maestro: he's just stared at me...then, slowly, his head turned and I saw him looking off stage. My eyes drifted over to stage left and there, waiting at the edge of the set was my understudy with this...glow...this...triumphant radiance.

Hell if I was going to let her finish the cadenza and sing the last note of the piece. Lucia dies after the cadenza...the irony is not lost on me...so when the flutist finished a phrase and before the orchestra could come back in I collapsed in a heap (per the staging) and the curtain fell.

Now when I say I lost my voice I mean it didn't come back for two months and when it did - well, I sound like that woman on the commercials with the hole in her throat from smoking (laughs).

I was done....at 23....ruptured blood vessel on my vocal fold. Irreparable. Sounds so final doesn't it. Irreparable. If I had been a race horse...well...

Singing was my life. My only dream was to be a famous operatic diva.

So...you get new dreams. Right?

I mean you don't just get to have one dream. Right?

Right?