



Jim Klobuchar

A BARRACKS CRONY of mine, Dave Lilienthal, wrote a book years ago called "Seconds," which was corrupted into a movie starring Rock Hudson.

In its written form it was one of those psychological grippers, spinning around the notion of a new identity for people alienated by their old one. If you had the capability of creating a new adult life for yourself, it asked, in what direction would you go? Would you thrill the worshipful thousands at Salzburg, cure the world's asthma, seduce its saints, salt its streets?

Lilienthal was provoked by Sunday afternoon brainstorm sessions in Germany in which five or six of us used to speculate on this very thing. I sent him trembling to the typewriter one day with the flat declaration that life as an operatic idol was the only one that offered me any real dazzlement as a second-chance operation.

Lilienthal had spent months listening to my remorseless tenor in the barracks' shower. "The whole thesis of this book has gotten out of hand," he said. "Projecting you as an opera star turns it into science fiction."

A MATADOR ENTERS, IN PAIN

It was the kind of naked, uncompromising judgment that gets authors into trouble. For evidence I offer the spectacle of last night at Scott Hall on the University of Minnesota campus, where I debuted as a matador in Bizet's "Carmen."

I will not pretend I was mobbed by the aficionados in the emotional surge of the audience that accompanied the final curtain. Despite my newness to the medium, I'm familiar with its traditions. I deferred the bravos to Melanie Sonnenberg as Carmen, both as a duty of chivalry and out of consideration for my aching groin.

They provided me with velvet toreador pants for a walk-on in the matadors' procession in the fourth act. The breeches fit at the knees but came up short at the crotch. If the bullfighters wear those things at Granada they have more to fear from hernia and asphyxiation than they do from the bull. The only person who could have worn them in comfort was Eddie Arcaro.

LET ME TELL YOU why the fit was important. The matadors' procession was competitive. "Carmen" is an opera of thermal passions, nicely stoked with hatreds, jealousies and revenges. It is therefore considered an ideal field to showcase the natural inclinations of people in the newspaper, radio and television business. Accordingly, the sponsors invited radio's Charlie Boone; Garrison Keillor, the young and bearded all-purpose sage of KSNB-TV; and me to join Escamillo in the bull ring procession.

I wasn't worried about Keillor. He is 6-foot-5, preoccupied and frequently mistaken for Orson Welles on a diet. They couldn't find a pair of toreador pants long enough for Keillor. He walked on wearing the cream longies and black leather boots of a Spanish dragon. He would have looked great standing in front of a bon-bon shop. But as a bullfighter his credibility was shot to hell, since Boone and I glommed the only two red capes in the dressing room.

Boone was a legitimate threat. He has impressive theatric experience, which is required of everybody who has to read the weather on radio. The stage instructions required the matadors to receive the adulation of the mobs with their customary hauteur and dramatics.

The producer-director, Vern Sutton, preceded us, flinging salutes and flourishes with the approved toreador vanky.

Boone followed, insufferable. He was wearing red pants, which gave him an edge. Contemptuously he milked the crowd in front of the bull ring, as though throwing straight lines to Maynard Speece.

"BOONE IS GOING TOO FAR," I said clenched-lipped backstage to Robert Moulton, the choreographer. "Look at all those arm gestures. Is he going to the bull ring or the flight deck of an aircraft carrier?"

"The matador," Moulton observed, "is beyond the normal rules of theatrical restraint. My advice to you is to let it all fly out."

With my tailoring, I just refused to accept this counsel as wise or legal. Moulton pushed me onto the stage. I wasn't sure how I could overpower Boone's act and it bothered me because the opera was an authentic ardor of mine. How did Boone deserve it? For one thing, he had just shaved. A mark of the bullfighting novice. Name me one bull that is going to be impressed by the scent of Brut.

So I had this dilemma halfway across the stage until the toreador pants solved it. The suspenders tore up the breeches and I hitched out of habit. You cannot imagine the sudden stress factors. My arms soared instinctively and the red cape made violent swishing movements. The bull ring crowd roared, inflamed. I did a center stage turn and the toreador pants were implacable. I waved wildly. They called it one of the great matador entrances in local opera.

"We will send you," Moulton said, "a shriveled bull's ear in the mail."