

Some Memories of Licia Albanese and Her Surprising Husband, Joe Gimma

by James A. Drake



James Drake

Jim Drake has devoted a substantial part of his polymath career to studying the lives and personalities of opera singers, with well-regarded books on Lily Pons, Richard Tucker, and Rosa Ponselle (in fact, there are two different books on Rosa, both essential). He also contributes to Edmund St. Austell's blog Great Opera Singers, see for instance his articles there on Robert Weede, James Melton, and Ponselle.

Jim knew Licia and Joe Gimma well and offered to set down these remarks about their interactions for our JBS Journal and, in August 2014, for our JB Yahooogroup. (Dan Shea)

Licia Albanese and I spent a considerable amount of time together from 1977 until 2008, when she and I did an onstage interview here in Florida, at the Vero Beach Opera Company. Additionally, and just as importantly to me, I had the privilege of getting to know Joseph A. Gimma, whom she had married in 1945.

Anyone who thought that the diminutive Albanese was a formidable person, had no idea what “formidable” meant unless they had met Joe Gimma. From Manhattan to Washington, and in the financial capitals of his native Italy, Joe Gimma was one of the most powerful and influential investment bankers, political (Republican), and performing-arts fundraisers of his time. When he died in 1990, his pallbearers included Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford.

If I may share with you two stories about Joe Gimma, I think you'll get a sense of what he was like. The first story centers on the book I wrote about Rosa Ponselle which was published by Doubleday in 1982.

I had been offered a contract by Doubleday through my agent at the time, and Pavarotti had already agreed to contribute the foreword, so of course I was elated that my first book would be published by the prestigious Doubleday Company. I celebrated for about a week, when I got an urgent call from my agent saying that Doubleday had just withdrawn the offer and therefore would not be publishing the book.

Ponselle's 80th birthday party took place about two weeks later, at her home (Villa Pace) in Baltimore. The party was an elaborate celebration that many of the great singers and conductors who had known her attended, including Licia Albanese.

The morning after the party, I was invited to brunch at a nearby hotel with Albanese, Bidú Sayão, and Stella Roman, who had traveled together to Baltimore.

At the brunch, Albanese casually asked me how the Ponselle book was coming along. When I told her what Doubleday had done, she dramatically slammed her knife and fork onto the tabletop and said, “Those people have no understanding of art! I hear that they're going to make an offer to Dorothy Kirsten. What idiot would offer a book contract to Kirsten, who is a nothing, but not to Rosa Ponselle!” She then said, “Wait until my husband finds out about this!”

At 9:00 on the morning after I got home from Baltimore, I answered the phone and was told, “Please hold for Mr. Joseph Gimma”—and then I was put on hold for a minute or two. The next voice I heard was Mr. Gimma, who said to me, “Hello, young man, you and I haven't met, but you know my wife Licia, and she tells me that you're having a problem with Doubleday. Tell me what the problem is.”

I explained that they had withdrawn the contract, to which he replied, “Well, I know somebody over there, and I'm going to call him about this. Now give me the title of your manuscript, and the names of any editors that you or your agent have been dealing with.”

Apparently, he wrote down the information I gave him. Then he said, “Tell your agent not to have any contact with Doubleday. When I say no contact, I mean no contact, so tell your guy not to return any calls, answer any letters, or speak to anybody from Doubleday. Just sit tight, and I'll call you after I talk with the guy I know over there.”

Two days later, I got a personal call from the editor I had been working with at Doubleday. She called me from her home and said that what she was going to tell me was totally confidential and that I couldn't even tell my agent about it. She said that for the first time in anyone's memory in the editorial wing of Doubleday, the president of the company came to the editorial offices. He wanted to know who had been working on the Rosa Ponselle book. He talked to the editor-in-chief for a minute, and then left.

The editor-in-chief then called her into his office. He told her that I was being given a new contract at double the amount of the advance I had originally been offered, that the new contract was being sent to me by overnight mail, and that she was to work with me to complete the editing process ASAP. Sure enough, the new contract was delivered to my home the next day.

Late that afternoon, I took another call and was again told, "Please hold for Mr. Joseph Gimma." I didn't have to wait very long until Mr. Gimma said, "Hello again, young man, did you get something in the mail from your publisher?" I said yes and told him that I was so grateful to him, and that I wished there was something I could do for him in return. He said no, that he had done this out of respect for the great Rosa Ponselle, and for me as her chosen writer.

Being young and naive at the time, I asked him if he would mind telling me how he was able to do what he had just done with Doubleday. He laughed and said (and I can remember this almost verbatim), "Well, the way business works is that you do favors and you get favors depending on who you know and what your history is with them. It just so happens that the head of Doubleday is the son of my first partner in investment banking."

He went on to say that the father was one of the giants in the banking industry, and had given Mr. Gimma his first opportunity to prove himself. He said that the father (who was about the age of his own father) had guided Mr. Gimma and had

become so impressed with him that the older man eventually made Mr. Gimma his partner. They became so close, Mr. Gimma said, that the older man asked him to be the godfather of his son.

So, as Mr. Gimma then explained to me, after he heard about the problem with the Ponselle book contract, he had invited the Doubleday CEO and his wife to dinner at his and Albanese's home. He told me that after dinner, he had taken the man to his study while Licia entertained the spouse in a different room.

He said he closed the door to his study and told the man (and again, I remember this almost verbatim), "You know how close your father and I were, and you know that I was there for your baptism, that I am your godfather, and that I used to bounce you on my knee when you were a little boy. You also know that I am very, very unhappy about this Ponselle situation. Licia is on my back about it, so I'm getting grief about it at home, which also makes me very, very unhappy.

"It's now your job to make me happy again. The way you're going to do that is by telling your people to offer another contract by the end of the day tomorrow, with twice the advance that was offered the first time. If you don't, I'm going to bounce you again—but this time, I'll bounce your head off the ceiling!"

Needless to say, I received the new contract immediately.

The second of the two stories was told to me by Robert Merrill. As I typically did in the interviews I conducted with singers (which I was tape-recording with their consent, of course), I asked them about other artists of the past and present.

During one of my interviews with Merrill, I asked if he had ever felt intimidated by any other singers or conductors. I figured that he would reply by re-telling the story of his firing and subsequent re-hiring by Rudolf Bing. Instead, he said, "Yes, only once, and it was in Italy with Joey Gimma. I got so tongue-tied that I actually couldn't

talk, just mumble. I literally couldn't make a word come out of my mouth, my boyhood stutter had returned! Just ask Joey because he still rides me about it."

Merrill said that when he was staying with Mr. Gimma in Italy, they went to the racetrack every afternoon and had the best of everything, especially food and drink, in the Gimma private box. When they arrived at the track, Mr. Gimma told Merrill to sit next to him, and that he would introduce him to his other guests as the races went on, and would also act as an interpreter since Merrill didn't speak Italian. Merrill said that, as directed, he took the seat next to Mr. Gimma, was immediately attended to by a butler, and he watched the first race.

He said that during the entire race, Mr. Gimma spent the time conversing in Italian with an older man whom Merrill estimated to be in his seventies. Merrill said the man had sparse white hair and a somewhat weathered face, but otherwise looked healthy, agile, and vigorous.

Even after the second race had started, Merrill said, Mr. Gimma kept talking with the man. Then Mr. Gimma suddenly turned to Merrill and said, "Jeez, Bob, I'm sorry for ignoring you, but I was 'talking shop' with my friend here. I just told him about you being at the Met and what you're singing there, and he says he'd like to meet you. So Bob, shake hands with my dear friend, Titta Ruffo." ■

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Editor's note: In *Jussi*, Anna-Lisa relates the role played by Joseph Gimma for the recording of *Manon Lescaut*. She also says, *Licia Albanese and her husband, Joe Gimma, were among our closest friends. Joe was a successful businessman with a lot of "street smarts." . . . I especially remember Licia's lasagna, the best I ever had, and Joe's advice on stock investments.* See *Jussi* by Anna-Lisa Björling and Andrew Farkas, pp. 253, 254, 278.