

Sursa: Blogul "Opera Think Tank" (acum inactiv)

## Big Belly: The Verdi-Boito Falstaff Letters



I've been reading [The Verdi-Boito Correspondence](#) in my research on Falstaff, which I'm directing for [Boston Opera Collaborative](#) in July. I've distilled most of what the letters say about the writing of the opera. V = Verdi writing to Boito, and B = Boito writing to Verdi. My comments are in *italics* or brackets. Take a look:

### July 1889

V after reading B's sketch: Too bad that the interest (It is not your fault) does not grow all the way to the end. The climax is the finale of the second act. ... I fear also that the last act, despite its fantastic element, could seem weak... You only have two weddings! All the better, since they have little connection with the main plot.

*In the Shakespeare, the two parents each plan weddings, and are outsmarted by Quickly, who sets Nanetta up with Fenton. In the opera, Boito combined Quickly's wedding and the mom's wedding, so that the women triumph over the men, instead of children over parents. I think this contributes to the feminist theme of the opera.*

B: No doubt about it: the third act is the coldest...in the theatre, this means trouble. Unfortunately, this is a law common to all comic theatre. ... In comedy, when the knot is about to be unraveled, interest always dwindles because the end is happy. ...Even Shakespeare, with all his skill, could not escape this general law. ... Comedy unravels the knot; tragedy severs it.

This little love story between Nannetta and Fentone must appear in very frequent bursts; in all the scenes where they appear they will kiss secretly in corners, cleverly, boldly, taking care not to be noticed, with fresh little phrases and brief, very rapid and sly little dialogues... It will be a very lighthearted love, constantly disturbed and interrupted and always ready to begin again. We must not forget this... To be sure, Fenton's song is pasted in there to give the tenor a solo, and this is too bad. Shall we cut it?

Sursa: Blogul "Opera Think Tank" (acum inactiv)

V: You have already improved this third act...but afterwards the weddings distract the attention that should be all addressed to Falstaff, and the action cools.

B: ...without weddings there's no happiness... I like that love of theirs, it serves to make the whole comedy more fresh...to such a degree that I would almost like to eliminate the duet of the two lovers. ...I would like to sprinkle the whole comedy with that lighthearted love, like powdered sugar on a cake, without collecting it at one point.

August 1889

B: I live with the immense Sir John, the big paunch, the bed-destroyer, the stool-smasher, the mule-masher, with that besotted bag of sweet wine, that living heap of butter, amid the barrels of sherry and the merriment of that warm kitchen at the Garter Inn.

At first I was in despair at the thought of sketching the characters with a few lines, moving the plot, extracting all the juice from that enormous Shakespearian pomegranate, allowing no useless seeds to slip into the glass. I wanted to write colorfully and clearly and concisely...so that an organic unit results that is a piece of music and at the same time is not...All this is difficult, difficult, difficult, but it must seem easy, easy, easy.

Onward, with courage.

*I read that letter to the cast and company at the first meet -- it was a hit.  
Thanks, Mr. Boito.*

V talking about the second act: It is possessed of the devil and if you touch it you burn your fingers. The content...no longer satisfies me...If Alice expounds the details of the joke, the joke then loses interest.

*Verdi is astute to point this out, and the resulting tension flowing into the Falstaff meeting is palpable. I only wish they had taken the same note for the set-up prior to the last scene of Act III, which for me, drags us a bit into the finale.*

March 1890

B: Remember, Dear Maestro, that whenever you find in the libretto of Falstaff something to change or to revise, I am always completely ready to hear you and to make the variant at once. I am very slow in writing, but very swift in revising what is already written. When a work of art is good on the whole, improving the details is very easy.

April 1890

B: Yesterday evening I heard *Don Pasquale*. It went well. I think I have found a good Ford...He will have to rid himself of the old traditions of the Italian *buffi*, which are all right for Don Pasquale but for Ford would be blasphemy.

March 1891

Sursa: Blogul "Opera Think Tank" (acum inactiv)

V: I have received [the Falstaff rendering, from their designer]...it is handsome, distinctive...but I would add then that with those sleepy eyes, he has the appearance of a man dead drunk. Falstaff should not be obese, not a drunkard, since he always has so much wit....

tell me meanwhile if you want the word "Windsor" accented on the first of the second syllable!

B: I don't believe in the whole of the English language there is a word accented on the last syllable. ... And here, I must confess, that once, in your libretto, I have broken this rule, just once...but if I fixed the accent I spoiled the verse, and I preferred, between the two evils, to falsify the accent of the word.

*Boito's referring to the Falstaff's arietta regarding the Duke of Norfolk. This dialogue shows how detailed they were in their creation, but here was no absolutism...they hemmed and hawed, fixed mistakes, made exceptions. We honor them by examining these works continually and not treating them like golden eggs that were laid in perfection.*

June 1891

V: Big Belly is on the road that leads to madness. There are days when he doesn't move, sleeps, and is ill-tempered; at other times he shouts, runs, leaps, makes a great rumpus...I let him frisk a bit, but if he persists, I will put a muzzle on him and a straitjacket.

B: Hurrah! Give him free rein, let him run; he will break all the window panes and all the furniture of your room, no matter, you will buy others; he will smash the piano...let everything be turned topsy-turvy! but the great scene will be done!

September 1891

V: It's not true that I have finished ... I am at work filling out the full score with everything I have done so far because I am afraid of forgetting some passages and instrumental textures. Afterwards I will do the first part of the third act...and then Amen! This part is shorter, and less difficult than the others...However... here [Falstaff's first recitative] what is needed is a *motive*, which diminishes, fading into a *pianissimo*, perhaps with a solo violin in the catwalks over the stage. Why not? If they put orchestras in the cellar, why couldn't we put a violin in the attic!?

*Can you imagine the stage manager's call? "First chair violin, to the catwalks, please, to the catwalks for the top of act three..."*

May 1892

B: In the costumes of our characters we must avoid the *too beautiful* ... Pistola and Bardolfo must wear clothing that seems threadbare: we want to see finally something onstage that they never dare show, namely, *real rags*...rags in tone and cut...if Murillo could lend us his, that would be ideal!

*This is part of the reason why I think Falstaff is better done in modern or 20th century costume, since anything centuries old does not look threadbare to a*

Sursa: Blogul "Opera Think Tank" (acum inactiv)

*modern audience: it looks like a million dollar antique with dirt thrown on it. The class delineations in this opera are tricky and need to sink in clearly.*

### September 1892

B: We will [visit you] with the stage model in our overnight bag, to show you...all the partial drops and practicable structures in order. In this way we will be able to see and judge precisely every slightest detail of the staging, and thus we will have no unpleasant surprises at the stage rehearsals.

*For the record, from the notes of this book, it seems as if they rehearsed the premiere from 4 January to the opening on 9 February 1893, with Verdi leading the troops with Boito, working six to eight hours daily. Sounds about right for a new comic opera, written by an 80-year-old man.*