

**BARBARA
TANNENBAUM**

Lost and Found at the Hollywood Bowl

When Queen Dido purchased land in North Africa to build Carthage; when Jason, in search of the Golden Fleece, provisioned wax for his sailors to outwit the Sirens; when turbaned sultans in *Tales of Arabian Nights* strolled the marketplace of Baghdad with sacks of money and bejeweled daggers; the coin of the realm was called sequins. Not drachmas, not bullion, not shillings, but sequins.

In the passing of the millennia, those shimmering discs had lost most of their worth but none of their luster. In the difficult decade of the 1930s, when currency was scarce and credit was tight, one city in the United States still had the workaday craftsmen who knew how to tease out a sequin's enduring value. That city was Hollywood.

Here, opera stars whose voices were renowned across three continents would not dare appear onstage without being swathed in an iridescent glow, much like a mermaid's spellbinding luminance. Such was the case of Lily Pons, the great French soprano and star of the Metropolitan Opera, who commanded the stage at the Hollywood Bowl on a balmy August evening in 1936.

The largest audience ever assembled in that sumac-perfumed dell filled the canyon to hear Mademoiselle Pons. Beyond the amphitheater, a national audience awaited her arias, listening via a rare, coast-to-coast NBC radio hookup that would span the continent. The coloratura

singer was not looking at the single microphone poised like a sapling in the middle of the bare stage. Tucked away beyond the audience's sight lines, Mademoiselle stood with eyes closed in a small space behind the band shell's concentric rings as a stout, square-jawed wardrobe supervisor attended to her costume.

This matronly woman, whose dark braids twisted like ramparts around her head and were fastened with a large tortoiseshell comb, had been sent over by RKO-Pathé. She'd been selected for her talents that included great dexterity with needle and thread and the ability to speak French. Balancing on a stepladder, poised above the singer, the woman bit down on several differently sized needles, the threads hanging over her bottom lip. Straight pins poked threateningly from the tomato pincushion she wore as a bracelet around her wrist. Pulling hard at Lily Pons's shoulder straps and bodice, she asked brusquely, "*Est-ce bon?*"

"*Oui,*" the singer answered with a grimace. "Yes, Mrs. Horowitz."

The older woman nodded, taking care not to disturb a single strand of the singer's coiffed hair, resuming her ministrations in the hidden folds of the satin chiffon gown, her fingers painstakingly working between long plumes of sequins, seed pearls, and bugle beads.

A native of Paris, Mrs. Irene Horowitz had found herself on the warm shores of America's West Coast, having migrated with her husband, a doctor, on the eve of World War I. They joined a small colony of French expatriates on the eastern side of Los Angeles in the Angelino Heights neighborhood.

Despite her status as a married woman, Mrs. Horowitz took tea with the French painter Paul de Longpré. She dined with Madame Zucca, proprietress of downtown's Paris Inn Café. And she took a taxi to the Vendome to dance with Adolphe Menjou. For there were many nights when her husband drank too much Scotch, falling asleep at the dinner table of their Victorian home.

Prohibition came, but anyone could drive to the unincorporated parts of Los Angeles to find a private nightclub that sold liquor. By then, the Horowitzs had three children. Dr. Horowitz waited until they were grown and President Roosevelt restored the legal sale of alcohol to drink himself blind on a nightly basis.

The year previous to Mme. Pons's appearance at the Bowl, the doctor crashed his Buick Arrow into a herd of cows in a barley field obscured by fog on the west side of town. His colleagues at County General Hospital said he would recover, but his hands would never be steady enough for surgery.

The next day, Mrs. Horowitz took the streetcar to West Hollywood to inquire of milliners, ladies' apparel manufacturers, and wardrobe departments of the many small movie studios if they could use a woman of her talents. She was soon hired by the wardrobe department of RKO-Pathé.

This experience gave the stern woman a small measure of empathy. It enabled her to murmur sympathetically when Lily Pons complained about her stage fright. Of her shortness of breath from the tight bodice. In mademoiselle's mother tongue, Mrs. Horowitz replied with calming words as her thumbs and forefingers pushed and prodded down along her ribcage, transforming a short, undernourished, reed-thin woman into a tall, voluptuous creature, appealingly curvaceous in the spotlight's harsh glare.

At the far end of the amphitheater, past the packed wooden benches of the Starlight section, the overflowing crowd had crossed a paved roadway to spread blankets and coats on the sage-covered hillside. The Bonaventure family was among the latecomers. As the concert began, the four of them—father and mother and their two daughters—had to lean against the wooden fence on the slope's perimeter. Still, at the furthest reach of the canyon dell, they could hear the great coloratura's every note as it wafted crisp and clear through the soft night air.

Having secured a place after a long walk uphill, Simon Bonaventure could not suppress the hacking sound of his constant cough. With every gasping intake of air, his wife, Cecilia, issued panicked commands, some in English, other phrases in her own half-remembered French patois, instructing her children to find any drink that might soothe their father's throat.

"It's your turn," said the older girl, Iris. She handed her younger sister their single copy of the ten-cent "Symphony Under the Stars" program, pointing to the location of a food stand on the back-cover map. Adele Bonaventure nodded happily and began reading the pages of the much-desired program, now in her possession.

"Advertise with light!" exhorted Otto K. Olesen of the Olesen Illuminating Company from an inside page.

"Get a move on," commanded her sister.

Adele paused, extending an open hand. Her father's chest spasmed with unending coughs.

Iris growled, "Just ask for water. They won't charge for a paper cup."

Empty-handed save for the program, the girl made her way down the hillside, craning her neck to see over the heads of women in their formal hats, the towering men in their summer sport coats.

She was twelve years old, shorter than her coltish sister and could still use her small stature and high-pitched voice to move through the crowd. She made quick work of the promenade ramps filled with strangers packed body to shoulder, darting around people's legs. She found the tiniest spaces to place her feet between the seated figures in the aisles and made her way to the edge of the stage.

Having no ticket, she waved the Bowl's program high in the air as if it were a special license. The uniformed ushers paid her no attention. Surely a person so young and determined was making her way to her family's reserved box seat.

It was then Adele found herself ensnared within the ancient rivalry between the potency of sight and the seductive power of sound. She had climbed over a railing on the furthest aisle and caught a glimpse of Lily Pons backstage. She saw the empty microphone center stage, punctuating those concentric, Saturn-like rings of the band shell like an exclamation mark. It was captivating. The anxious push generated by her father's sharp cough faded into stillness.

The beckoning stage was as white as the moon, more beautiful than the sky above. Adele's spine pulsed from the sight of it. In her eyes, the earthbound stage flaunted the laws of gravity as surely as the coloratura top notes of Lily Pons's fabled arias pierced the world's atmosphere, floating through space like trace particles. The child stood near the orchestra pit behind the low retaining wall. She was transfixed.

The conductor rose from his offstage chair and walked down five short steps to his podium. The musicians were looking down at their metal stands, reviewing their sheet music. With the mere flick of his arm, the translucent baton soared through the air. A bow caressed every string

of cello, of violin, of standup bass, the resounding notes aimed at the outermost boundaries of the sky's dark canvas.

The singer walked out and took her place in the center of the telescoping band shell. Adele watched Mme. Pons take a backward step to make her graceful bow, one hand fluttering above her heart. Released, the audience exhaled as one and gathered up its arms to cheer. Adele did not move from her spot on the railing until she felt a firm hand yank hard on her shoulder. She turned to see the steel-gray eyes of Mrs. Irene Horowitz bearing down upon her face. The spell was broken.

"Take your seat," the matron instructed. Adele jumped down to the pavement. Ducking her head, she threw herself back into the moving crowd and listened to Act II of the program from the edge of the second promenade, squeezed next to the gabardine pants of a strange girl's father.

At the second intermission, a clattering of high heels, wingtips, and lace-ups shuffled along the stairs. Boxed in on the staircase, Adele finally realized her plight: despite the surrounding multitudes, she was lost and completely alone. Could she rejoin her family? Could she find them in the dark? Had they already left their spot to look for her?

Adele spun around in a rising wave of panic. The sight of the Bowl—those rings!—helped concentrate her thoughts. She surveyed her surroundings again, this time with the cold force of logic. There was the microphone, unattended, on stage. There was the orchestra pit filled with the musicians. There were the rich swells in their box seats, the majority milling about and stretching their legs.

There were also the ushers, marked out by their green uniforms, helpful as hotel bellboys. In fact, there was one young usher just a few feet away. He was positioned near an empty box seat and eyeing an abandoned topcoat draped over the railing.

There was nothing particularly helpful-looking about this young man. His eyebrows were thick brush strokes, illustrating his thoughts like calligraphy. He inched towards the coat, rubbing his finger against the fabric. He held it up. It would have fit a taller, skinny man, but not him. He was barrel-chested with broad shoulders. He tossed the coat back and reached in his pocket for a cigarette.

There he was, absorbed as he smoked, and tilting his head as he looked around, squinting at the passersby.

More precisely, Adele observed, he was listening. The program of classical standards always brought the city's European residents to this dell. He was amusing himself by eavesdropping, and when they passed, parroting their French nasal vowels, the glottal German sounds, or soft Scottish burrs. If they looked back, his eyes turned vacant. As if by seeing no one, Adele understood, no one could see him.

But she did see him. His vest and jacket appeared a little tight. But he had a nice look to his face, with dark hair and thick pomade curls slicked against his large head and a long, chiseled nose rising out of fleshy cheeks. Clearly, he thought himself invisible as he reached again to explore the contents of that topcoat. His long fingers probed the inner lining again, taking away a yellow boutonniere. He kept his eyes fixed on the vacant middle distance as he strolled up the aisle, placing the flower into his own uniformed lapel.

Adele walked in front of him and blocked his escape. "I need your help," she demanded, taking care to meet his eye. With a glance, she indicated the box seat with its rumpled coat behind them. The young man was too startled to speak.

"I'm lost," she admitted. "Or my parents are," she added. "Either way—we're separated. They must be worried." She pointed to the microphone. "Will you jump on stage and ask them to come find me by the orchestra pit?"

His eyes narrowed as he gave her the once-over. "Are you kidding? I'm not allowed on stage." He spoke with yet another melodious accent, this time Spanish. Tears welled up as Adele wondered if he was teasing her.

Seeing that, he added gruffly, "Don't you see? I'll get in trouble." He tapped the flower in his lapel. "A lot more trouble than from filching this." He glared, tilting his gaze towards the stagehands moving equipment over to the side.

Adele took a deep breath. "Can't you use one of your voices? Make it like a joke," she begged. This time her lip was trembling. "Please. I don't know how to get home."

Reluctantly, the young man studied the empty microphone stand, center stage. He glanced at the tuxedoed conductor, turned back at the audience, and finally, noted the huddle of musicians by the reflecting pool. He curled his lip decisively, asking, "How old are you, kid?"

"Twelve."

"And your name?"

"Adele," she said eagerly, "Adele Bonaventure."

He frowned and paused, drumming his fingers against his cheeks. Then he slapped his belly hard with an open palm. It had a satisfying tone, like smacking a watermelon.

"Oh, what the hell," he exclaimed. With an agile leap over the railing of the pit, he ran up the green wooden steps reserved for the conductor's use only.

The young man hurled himself onstage and grabbed hold of the mike stand as if taking hold of a person's throat.

"Excuse me, *excusez-moi*, pardon me," he said loudly, so loudly that the giant towers squawked with feedback and reverberation. The musicians of the Los Angeles Philharmonic looked around to see if someone, the conductor perhaps, recognized the intruder.

"I'd apologize in German but no one would believe me," he leered. Across his face, a startled expression interrupted his delivery. His amplified voice had reached beyond the amphitheater, echoing across the canyon. Now it bounced back and surprised him.

A murmur of laughter rippled through the audience. Encouraged, he cleared his throat and resumed. "Are you enjoying this wonderful program of French music and opera?" The crowd rumbled with delight. The conductor walked over to the side of the stage, smacking the baton against his hand like a metronome.

"Well," the man paused, searching the crowd. "It is customary for the French to be philosophical." The audience grew still, awaiting his next words. The utter silence was unnerving.

"Lost causes," he continued, hiding behind a thick French accent. He regained his composure. "Lost opportunities. Lost time that can *never* be regained." His voice grew firm and dropped an octave. He sounded intimate, confiding. "But I'm not talking about literature. I'm talking about children. Lost children."

The audience seemed to hush as it followed him.

He pointed down to Adele. "There is a little girl right here," he announced. "I thought she was speaking French. She was crying *whew-whew-whew*. She wasn't saying *yes-yes-yes* about Lily Pons. No, she was crying for her parents."

A ripple of laughter rolled over the crowd. Adele saw it hit the young man in the face with the force of an

oceanic wave, washing away his surface expression that had been marked, she realized, by something hard and unforgiving. Suddenly, a vulnerable eagerness animated his muscles. The girl saw him expand, bobbing atop the audience's regard like a rowboat in the ocean. She waved for his attention.

"My name," Adele called out. "Tell them my name."

He covered the microphone with one thick hand. "Say again?" he called from the side of his mouth. He caught hold of her reply and nodded.

"So, if you are the parents of Adele Bonaventure," he repeated, "if you are Simon and Cecilia Bonaventure, please come down here and pick up your little girl." The audience murmured its approval, which he took as a sign of encouragement.

"Seriously, I've got the brain of a twelve-year-old," he laughed. "And if you want the rest of her, there she is," he pointed, "waiting for her parents to come pick her up."

The audience laughed again. This time, the conductor approached the steps and raised his baton threateningly, commanding the usher into silence. Still hearing the chuckles and mirth, the usher took a small bow, grinning with pride.

The conductor stood in front of him, blocking his exit. "When the NBC executive in Salt Lake City telephones me," he said sternly, "who shall I say gave this little comedy routine during intermission?"

"Salt Lake City is calling?" the usher repeated, not grasping the question.

"Your name," the conductor said impatiently. He pointed at a bank of microphones in the orchestra pit. "You made a little announcement that was carried coast-to-coast on a national radio hookup. I expect the top brass to make inquiries."

It took a moment for those words to register. "They heard me on NBC's Red Network?" From his pocket, the young man pulled out the evening's program. His hands were trembling. "They heard me in New York?" He glanced from the paper to the conductor's angry face.

"Yes," said the conductor. "And they'll need every name that spoke on this stage."

"Ah," the usher paused and looked around, his eyes falling on the program. "Rudolph Menglepuss," he announced confidently, extending his hand for the conduc-

tor to shake. “But call me Rudy,” he grinned. “Everyone does.”

The tuxedoed man pointedly turned away, leaving the usher’s hand dangling in midair. “Isn’t that a coincidence,” the conductor sniffed. “Sharing the name of an eighteenth-century German composer.” He glared at the young man. “We feature his song cycle in our next set. Perhaps I’m wrong. Maybe you wrote those numbers?”

Wary defiance tugged at the usher’s mouth and hardened his eyes. He held out his arms. “Dance with me and I’ll tell you,” he offered.

The conductor backed away. “Get off this stage before I have you fired.”

Rudy Minglepuss threw back his shoulders, waved at the crowd, and ambled down the stairs like a prizefighter.

Adele rushed forward and threw her arms around him. “See? You’re a natural,” she cried. “They’ll remember you as the man with the barrel-chested voice.”

“Sure, kid,” he said awkwardly, slipping out of her embrace. “Happy to help.”

“Should I call you Rudy?”

He readjusted his boutonniere thoughtfully as he studied the girl. “Well,” he paused, clearing his throat. “The real name is Raul—Raul Mendoza,” he whispered and brought a finger to his lips. “Don’t tell, okay?” He looked back at the orchestra. “Close though, isn’t it? Same initials and all.” He shrugged. “Can’t fire me if he only knows about a red-faced guy with a mangled puss.” He grinned at last.

Raul stayed by Adele’s side, smoking a cigarette as the audience returned to their seats. Each time a passing ticket-holder acted like they knew him, bestowing grins and smiles of approval, he cast Adele a puzzled glance.

“Good thing I got lost,” she said. “Got you some fans.”

At last she spied her father making his way downstairs, walking arm in arm with her sister. He was holding a handkerchief to his mouth and coughed from the smoke. With evident relief, Adele ran up the steps. But he continued his descent until he reached Raul.

“Thank you,” he said, shaking the young man’s hand so vigorously he had to stop and take a breath. “That was kind of you.”

“Tell it to them, willya?” Raul asked, jerking a thumb in the direction of the orchestra.

With a tilt of his head, Simon Bonaventure searched the far edge of the stage. “It is already done,” he concluded.

Adele turned to see her mother leaning by the steps, deep in conversation with the matronly woman who had been adjusting Lily Pons’s special dress. Cecilia Bonaventure had enveloped the woman’s right hand with both of her own in a firm grip. The wardrobe supervisor nodded, surveyed the audience, and pointed directly at Adele.

“Her?” Raul protested. “She’s not in charge.”

Simon Bonaventure patted the usher on the cheek. “You are still quite young, aren’t you?” he laughed. He gathered his daughters into his arms and continued his trek towards the stage.

“Don’t forget,” Adele said, turning back to face Raul. “You made your debut on the same bill as Lily Pons.”

“Whatever you say, kiddo,” he replied doubtfully.

“You’re going to be famous,” she insisted.

“Yeah,” he called to their retreating figures. “You and me both.”

It was fine if he didn’t believe her. Adele would remember their exchange not as a farewell but a promise. The audience’s response was an elixir, more potent than any gin and tonic the two would later drink.

And the expression Raul Mendoza wore on his true, unmangled face? Laughter had drained the bitterness. He glowed, effervescent, and not from the spotlights but from the sequins. As Rudy Minglepuss, he stood before a sea of iridescent light, a thousand flecks so bright he was blinded. Leaving him to calculate what other things long abandoned and deemed worthless could return to circulation.

Barbara Tannenbaum is a freelance journalist and author based in San Rafael, California. Her nonfiction has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Salon.com*, and *San Francisco* magazine. This story is an excerpt from her recently completed novel, *The Uncrowned Queen of Magnetic Springs*.

JOHN KILDUFF

Above Zuma Beach, 2013
Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST