The Opera Cleaners

By Ramón Griffero

1994

Translated by Adam Versényi

2015

Cast:

OLD ROSA

MARITZA

THE CLEANER

LOLO

SAMUEL

*The action takes place on the stage of the Opera Theatre, then in the street, and in the young men’s apartment.*

FIRST SEQUENCE

In the Opera Theatre

(*The Cleaners stand in a line at the edge of the stage, each with their bucket and their mop.*)

Maritza’s Performance

THE CLEANER: The three of us entered in a line, each of us with her bucket and her mop, and all at once we began to mop the stage, I knew that we wouldn’t go three meters before Maritza would let her utensils fall and, gathering up her skirts, untying her bun, she’d begin to tap her heels like a flamenco dancer, believing herself to be the Great Martita of Lima.

(*Maritza leaves the stage and returns with a black mink, lowers her neckline and starts zapateando and singing cante jondo, she exits and then re-enters to receive her applause.*)

OLD ROSA: That’s enough nonsense-- we have to get home.

THE CLEANER: Maritza’s the one something will happen to, she’s saying good-bye.

MARITZA: Ayy, I’m tired, I don’t know how the artists do it, and for such a long time.

OLD ROSA: This isn’t a nightclub. Stop, since you don’t know the difference between an artist and a . . . I better shut up, keep mopping, this has to shine tomorrow . . . Come over here, mijita, and let’s show her what an artistic scene looks like; the one that the Spaniards did.

“Stop looking at the plain . . .

His horse is no longer there . . .

It’s the light of absence that makes you

Cry so much.

THE CLEANER: “What are you saying?

That I should stop watching?

Leave my sad glance behind

. . . That I’m waiting in vain

For him to arrive . . .

You don’t treat love with disdain,

Like straw does a wheat field.

OLD ROSA: I see a mortal armament shininBetween your skirts . . . No, no. . . don’t do it, not even by accident.

THE CLEANER: Let this iron pierce my heart

That can endure no more . . .

Death announced itself to me today,

Arriving at a gallop . . .

OLD ROSA: Pay no attention . . .To the voices that want to do you harm.

THE CLEANER: What do you know of love

. . . and it’s fatal design?

Leave me alone, let go . . .

I will accompany him . . .

It’s my last regret . . . (*Stabs herself with the knife.*)

OLD ROSA: My sister, what sadness, what solace.

But what do I see? . . . There he comes

. . . his silhouette galloping across the mountain

. . . . Love that shouldn’t be there shining in his eyes . . .”

MARITZA: Killing yourself for a guy, the same old story . . . I’d get myself a lollipop and then ciao . . . Gallop . . . gallop . . . so much that you can’t anymore and then ciao . . .

OLD ROSA: I don’t know what you’re doing in this sacred space . . . You lack breeding and knowledge. Dear God, what kind of a country have we become?

MARITZA: You’re such a know-it-all . . . Of course, maybe you come from a well-heeled family . . . I’ve got plenty of culture, just not your kind, old woman.

THE CLEANER: Calm down, Maritza, we should all go together today, you haven’t heard the radio, there are more bad guys in the street every day.

MARITZA: Mijita, what I need is for one of these bad guys to appear and give me a buzz, because with the guy I’ve got at home I don’t know if I’ve got a cunt or not.

OLD ROSA: Look at you, indecent snot-nose, how can you use that vocabulary? Haven’t you realized yet that we’re in the Opera? We’re not cleaning motels.

THE CLEANER: And Maritza confronted her for the first time and told her this and that.

MARITZA: Look here, old lady, I’ve had it up to here with your stupidities, with your education about the Opera. They must have drained all the blood out of you that’s why you’re so afraid.

THE CLEANER: Now it became clear that she was saying good-bye.

(*They continue cleaning, Old Rosa throws a bucket of water and it grazes Maritza.*)

OLD ROSA: You were on my part of the stage. Okay, now, hurry up, I’ve got a delicious potato stew waiting for me at home.

(*Old Rosa hits her with a mop; they rip each other’s aprons.*)

THE CLEANER: I don’t know why I kept quiet, but I went towards the lip of the stage, almost at the edge, and I began to sing.

(*She sings “Madame Butterfly”, it’s as if she’s hallucinating, the others stop fighting and begin to rock, The Cleaner keeps singing.*)

OLD ROSA: Ayy, my God, it looks like she’s possessed.

MARITZA: What are you talking about, possessed. Hey, have you gone crazy?

THE CLEANER: Let’s hurry up-- it’s getting late.

(*She faints; Maritza brings some water from her bucket and revives her.*)

OLD ROSA: What’s wrong with her? I hope she doesn’t have any symptoms.

MARITZA: Shhttt . . . I’ve never seen you like this.

THE CLEANER: Don’t worry-- I’m fine. I picked up my things, hung up my apron . . .

Maritza fixed herself up and fixed herself up and Old Rosa put up with the tears.

OLD ROSA: Ay, why should I care about this, it’s someone else’s sorrow . . . perhaps this is what it means to get old and begin to lack love for real.

THE CLEANER: And then it felt like my blood pressure rose again, and I said “Maritza, let’s go together.”

SECOND SEQUENCE

In the Street

THE CLEANER: So we were in the street with me checking to make sure we weren’t hit by a car, or a microbus would have to slam on its brakes, and Maritza kept talking and talking.

MARITZA: You know this can’t go on like this much longer, you just see what happens when I get that old woman alone. When the ballet dancers came last time she wouldn’t let me clean the dressing rooms. What does she think—that I was going to offer myself there?

LOLO: Two beautiful ladies, you . . . yes . . . Come here, come, what are you two doing?

THE CLEANER: And she let go of my arm, and she moved and he moved, and the

young man looked her up and down.

MARITZA: Ayy, I thought you were Rolo--you look a lot alike.

LOLO: If you like Rolo we’re all right . . . You’re coming from the Theatre.

MARITZA: I work in the show . . . little things, you know . . .

LOLO: Artists have it good, you can see it; you can see how sensitive you are . . .

MARITZA: Thanks . . . But, listen, I can’t get over how much you look like Rolo.

LOLO: And Rolo is as much a guy as I am.

MARITZA: Don’t flatter yourself . . . and what are you doing?

LOLO: Checking out the calendar here . . . Thinking of inviting my parents to the opera as a gift. I bet that you’re in the ballet.

MARITZA: Well . . . yes.

LOLO: You can tell by the good leather you’re wearing . . .

MARITZA: Just like I do in the dance.

OLD ROSA: Don’t lose your opportunity, bitch . . . (*To herself*) And the other idiot waiting for her . . . Maybe when I get on the bus I’ll sit next to a cultured gentleman reading something and he’ll ask me: “Do you like to read as well?” And I’ll take advantage of the moment to tell him about the novels I have at home . . . That I belong to the municipal library and discover a different author each week . . . And I’ll ask him if he’d recommend what he’s reading. And then he’ll realize who he’s talking to and he’ll say, “Look, I was just reading about two strangers who meet on a journey” . . . He’ll realize besides that I’m intellectually attractive . . . Him in his marvelous suit. He’ll say to me: “It’s my lucky day, I couldn’t drive due to smog restrictions, that’s why I’m on the bus. And that’s how I got to meet you” and everything will continue giving . . . He’ll tell me that he separated two months ago. And that books help him deal with the solitude. It’s atrocious not have anyone with whom to watch the news. And I’ll take advantage of the moment to tell him that I’ve got a delicious potato stew at home. Why do only the whores on TV get to have luck?

LOLO: You must know María Callas.

MARITZA: No, I’ve only worked here a little while. She must have been here before I arrived.

LOLO: Don’t worry about it . . . But let’s not keep standing here . . . You’re so entertaining . . . Let’s go to my place.

MARITZA: You’re also very nice . . . Let’s go, then.

LOLO: I’ll give you a present there so you can see how nice I am. Tell your friend to relax, take it easy, no need to be so emotional.

MARITZA: She’s just super shy . . . but she’ll have to wake up.

THE CLEANER: And they kept talking, but, since I couldn’t leave her alone I drew near and said . . “Hey, Maritza, we should go. It’s getting late.”

LOLO: What’s your hurry? Let’s go to my apartment, I live with a friend, we’ll have some coffee, listen to some music, and all of a sudden we’ll dance.

MARITZA: We’ll do it all . . . This bastard has taken my heart. Come on, silly, maybe the other one will be just as good.

THE CLEANER: And, since I had to take care of her, I went with them . . .

THIRD SEQUENCE

In the Apartment

THE CLEANER: So the three of us found ourselves in an apartment with beautiful wallpaper, big flowers with a rose colored background.

MARITZA: Your place is incredible; Lolo, but you need a screen, the naked light bulbs are really ugly, I’ll give you one, if you want . . .

THE CLEANER: He brought three glasses, all of them different, and filled them with malice and Coca-Cola.

LOLO: The two of you are great . . . Cheers . . . (*His cell rings.*)

LOLO: Yes, better come at once . . . they’re ready, tipsy, hurry up, I’ve got them on the grill, yeah, ethnic types, I found them in the center itself . . . yours is a bit annoying . . . I’m sure she’s never felt it . . .

MARITZA: We’re in luck, girl, we’ve fallen into the real shit, a couple of decent guys,not like that Peruvian who’s always bothering you, we could both end the night with hot guys.This is a good drink Lolito . . . you’re so loving.

LOLO: Come here, then, so you can see just how loving I am.

THE CLEANER: He got a bit vulgar as he put his hand on her thigh and, I think he grabbed her intimate part. So I started to look at the parquet, which was very cracked . . . When I raised my gaze, he was licking her neck and opening her blouse. It’s a good thing they knocked because who knows what would have happened. Since I’m shy I looked out the window and saw that the sky was still agitated, even though nothing disgraceful had happened, provided that we’d get to daybreak and Maritza would save herself from the premonition.

LOLO: Hey, I told you I’d introduce you to my friend, I’ll leave the two of you alone.

THE CLEANER: How are you? Pleased to meet you.

SAMUEL: What’s your name? They call me Samuel.

MARITZA: Loosen up, girl--go for it . . . ciao.

SAMUEL: Come here, nearer, take a look . . . you can see the Entel Tower.

THE CLEANER: This would be a great place to spend New Year’s Eve . . . I commented . . . Then he rubbed up against me with his body and I realized that this was what the priest talked about . . . I was faced with temptation for the first time. And there in front of me, the false lights of the desert.

SAMUEL: The lights are beautiful.

THE CLEANER: As I thought to myself, these lights in the night are idolatry.

SAMUEL: Hey, you’re a quiet one . . . that’s the way I like my girls . . . with an interior life . . . you understand . . . You let yourself enter the panorama . . . If it penetrates you then you start to think . . . So many people in so many buildings . . . So, you work at the opera.

THE CLEANER: His eyes were black and received the bright filth of the city . . . I felt his breath . . . hot . . . expanding from the gullet of the dragon.Yes, I work there . . . in . . . cleaning . . .

SAMUEL: Relax, we’re here to have a conversation, two people who want to get to know each other . . . Everything’s cool . . . Do you like this poster? . . . I understand that you don’t want to talk; I’m also an interior sort of person . . . Do you see these vials I have? . . . In this one I keep my cut fingernails, the other one is all my own hair, it used to be down to here . . . And this one is full of all the cockroaches I find . . . Well, now, my pants are about to burst.

THE CLEANER: I had no idea what he was talking about. I did notice that he seemed educated, I thought he told me something about some vials so I asked . . . “Do you study medicine?”

SAMUEL: No, but my parents would like me to. Besides, you’d be able to stick your fingers wherever you want, and I’m very curious.

THE CLEANER: I was petrified, I couldn’t move, and so as not to seem rude I said . . . “Uyy, your parquet floor’s all cracked.”

(*The Cleaner’s feet begin to move by themselves, she begins to zapatear and then she faints.*)

VIOLATION

(*Samuel takes off her skirt, opens her blouse . . . rapes her.*)

THE CLEANER: When I opened my eyes I was on the ground, they’d taken off my skirt and an icy liquid ran from my place of sin . . . that’s when I knew they’d abused my person, violated the secret that I’d guarded for so many years for the one who deserved my love, and my sadness was so great, that my entire body cried, tears shed through my pores, my brain shook and I thought of my mother and the parish priest . . . “Why, why have you forsaken me, Lord? Why have you let evil possess my body?” My eyes crept out from under my eyelids and swung over all my limbs, the table, the glasses, everything trembled with my dishonor, but a lightning bolt hit my forehead and calmed me, and I realized that they hadn’t touched my soul, only the flesh, the body destined to turn to dust, and I asked my Lord for forgiveness . . .

(*The Cleaner gets up, gets dressed and hears noises in the next room.*)

That was when I remembered Maritza, the two guys, and my premonition.

(*She runs down the hall and stops, petrified.*)

They had Maritza there, crucified on the bed, the one with the longer hair was choking her with his member, and she was blue, unable to breathe. The other sunk his teeth into the birthplace and stuck a viper’s tongue inside of her.

(*The Cleaner runs towards the other side of the stage and returns gripping a knife like a sword.*)

And I grabbed the biggest knife, which was nothing less than Archangel Gabriel’s sword, and I buried it in his neck, that of the first demon eating her entrails. The other one, spitting pus from his penis and wailing like Lucifer, tried to attack me, but He guided my hand and I drove the sword through his chest.

(*Maritza enters, naked, covering herself with a shirt full of blood. The Cleaner embraces her.*)

THE CLEANER: I saved you—Maritza--I saved you . . . Praised be our Lord.

THE END