

# Soprano picks up where she left off, 30 years later

By **JORDANA DIVON**

Special to *The CJN*

There's a good chance any woman under 40 who hears Renee Barda's story will react with some measure of anger. Or at the very least, a strong opinion.

But first picture the era in which stories like Barda's regularly occurred. It's the early 1970s. A naïve, sheltered, but gifted young soprano from Toronto has just stepped onto the Heathrow Airport tarmac sporting two bags and a Canada Council grant.

She's only 23, and her life to this point has been nothing but a series of triumphs. The eldest daughter of doting parents, they encouraged her talent from the outset.

"My parents would buy me a record every Sunday of a famous opera star, and put it on while I had my breakfast," Barda, who is performing at the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre in Toronto on Dec. 11, recalls, sitting in her sunny Willowdale kitchen.

"I started piano lessons when I was six, and would play concerts every week for my aunts and uncles. Then they realized I had a voice, and the voice took over."

That voice landed the teenager at the University of Toronto's faculty of music, where she studied opera. The title role in a summer Stratford production of Rossini's *La Cenerentola* followed.

"The performances were absolutely magnificent," she says. "I worked like a dog and the reviews were great. And after that, I felt like a really big star."

Her professors agreed. Barda graduated with the Eaton Award, and a referral to study in England with the Hungarian vocal coach, Vera Rozsa. With her scholarship in tow, the young singer arrived, alone, in the British capital.

"Until that point, I wasn't sent to camp, or even allowed to mix outside of the house. It was a different generation," she says of her inexperience in those early London days.

So while her vocal technique flourished, the singer sought the familiarity of her sheltered Jewish upbringing. And at a Friday night gathering at Hillel House, she met Dino Barda, the charming, sophisticated and much older man who would become her husband.

"There wasn't a long courtship. He was many years older and he was just ready to get married," she says. "He came from an aristocratic Jewish Italian background. I had never met anyone like that. He knew all the little particulars about table manners, how to dress, how to handle yourself. I was very taken with this."

Around the same time Dino Barda proposed, the singer received the opportunity of her life: an audition at London's Covent Garden.

"They all said I had a great voice – very gifted, an unusual quality," she says matter-of-factly. "For the big time people, it's not just the technique, but what they call golden voices of a certain quality. Pavarotti had it, for example. They told me I had that, too."

The night before the Covent Garden tryout, Dino called and asked to take her for a drive. "I said I didn't want to be out late because my audition was in the morning, but he told me it wouldn't take long."

It didn't. Dino's message was simple: it's either me or your career.

"He said, 'I just spoke to my father in Rome and we decided you can't really raise a family if you're going to be trotting all over the world,'" Barda recalls. "He said, 'If you don't go, call me. But you have to be sure what you tell me is true, and a year after we get married you won't get disappointed and start singing again.'"

"I almost cried first, and then started thinking it over. I wasn't too rational about it," she says. "I was just so madly in love with this guy that the whole world was blinded."

Barda cancelled her audition.

"The agent who booked me was livid. He said, 'You'll never have an opportunity like this for the rest of your life. You're finished.'"

And until her husband's death 30 years later, so it seemed.



**Renee Barda**

Barda locked her music away in the basement and couldn't even bring herself to look at it. Several times, her husband caught her vocalizing in the shower and chided her for "getting ideas to go back to the opera." She stopped.

But it wasn't all bad. Barda adored being a mother to her three sons and took to her domestic tasks. Her husband's poor health also kept her busy. After their wedding, he revealed that he had a number of genetic disorders, including congenital kidney disease, Mediterranean Fever, and later in life, he had cirrhosis of the liver.

Barda remained his dedicated nurse until his death in 2000.

Two years later, her son startled her one night at the dinner table. "He said, 'You know, you never sang. We don't even know what you really sound like. Why don't you get back into it?'"

Barda realized there was no longer anything preventing her from singing again, except her own fear. But slowly, tentatively, she unlocked that basement door. Everything was still intact, just as she'd left it, including her voice.

"I picked up a big aria and thought, 'Nah. No way.' But I went through that aria and it was all there. I couldn't believe it. I was ecstatic, in tears."



Directed by **Ari Weisberg** January 5 - 16, 2011

Hannah and Zvi are reunited after divorcing twenty years earlier. Raised in Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox Mea Shearim, the couple ended their marriage when Zvi turned his back on Judaism and Hannah did not. Now the teenage children from their second marriages have become romantically involved, forcing Hannah and Zvi back into each other's lives.

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Since recovering her voice, Barda has been busy. In 2004, she recorded a CD. From there, concert dates, media coverage and even a TV documentary have followed.

When asked by younger women if she feels any resentment for what she gave up, the diminutive grandmother of three doesn't waver.

"There's also a lot of positive that happened: I adore my grandchildren, children and daughters-in-law," she explains. "I'm the kind of person that moves on in life. You can't change the past, so I look on the positive side of everything."

Barda performs classics of George Gershwin, Cole Porter, art songs and more at the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre, Al Green Theatre, Dec. 11 at 7:30 p.m. 416-924-6211.



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