

HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Mike Cobb



Atlanta. April 1924.

Air brakes squealed. The back-and-forth of the locomotive's massive pistons slowed. Steam billowed with a hiss from the engine's stack. The *New York & New Orleans Limited*, Southern Railway's flagship vestibuled train, chugged to a stop at Track 3.

Rosa Ponselle, jacquard traveling bag in hand, descended the steps from the Pullman car and onto the platform. At twenty-seven, she was already enjoying acclamation as one of the greatest operatic sopranos to grace the stage. Six years earlier, at the occasion of her operatic debut, *New York Times* critic James Huneker had called her "Caruso in petticoats," going on to write that "...she possesses a voice of natural beauty that may prove a gold mine."

Miss Ponselle was in town to star as Duchess Leonora in the New York Metropolitan Opera's performance of Giuseppe Verdi's "Il Trovatore," the second of a weeklong repertoire of operas to be performed by the Met's touring company as part of Atlanta Opera Week, a tradition dating back to 1910. Thousands of visitors would descend upon the city from all over the country to attend the weeklong extravaganza.

She would perform again, the following Saturday evening, in the role of Santuzza, a village girl betrothed to a young soldier, in “Cavalleria Rusticana.”

She entered the station’s massive Renaissance Revival main hall with a mix of excitement and anxiety. Since her early days as a silent movie accompanist in and around her home town of Meriden, Connecticut and, after that, performing with her sister in vaudeville, she had been beset by an almost paralyzing nervousness before live audiences. Her agita was most intense when she found herself, in her Metropolitan debut, playing opposite the world-renowned tenor Enrico Caruso.

But anxiety notwithstanding, she was hopeful that, God willing, come Wednesday morning she would awaken to glowing reviews of her performance the prior afternoon.

The porter loaded her stateroom trunk into the rear compartment of a waiting Black & White taxi. The driver headed up Forsyth Street on his way to the just-opened Biltmore Hotel on West Peachtree, hailed as by the *Atlanta Constitution* as “...a hostelry which, for splendor of appointments, completeness of detail and architectural and decorative beauty has no peer in the United States.” Most of the operatic company, the contraltos and sopranos, the tenors and baritones, the directors and orchestra conductors, the dancers and chorus, would call The Biltmore home during their Atlanta stay.

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The driver stopped alongside the curb at The Biltmore’s Colonial Revival entrance.

The hotel’s massive doors flew open as if by magic. Two liveried servants scurried down the canopied steps and to the taxi. One assisted Miss Ponselle out of the car. The other attended to her trunk.

She paused to admire the building’s eleven-story façade, a tapestry brick patterned in English bond, a style she had become familiar with in her wanderings through the boroughs of New York. She marveled at the portico and balustrade, rising high above the entrance and

supported across the front by towering Corinthian columns. The five rounded-arched, pilaster-framed windows, two stories high, at each end of the building facing West Peachtree. The broken-scroll pediments atop the rectangular windows. She had stayed at grand hotels during her travels on behalf of the Met, but none more palatial.

The footman escorted her up the marble stairs and into the expansive lobby, a majestic hall bedecked with the finest Georgian and Queen Anne furnishings money could buy. Eleven Austrian tufted rugs graced the floor. Sparkling crystal chandeliers bathed the room in soft ambient light. Bronze and marble statuary, the likes of which one would encounter in the finest European galleries, held court down the center of the room. Lush Madagascar palms lined the east and west walls. A second-floor balustrade mezzanine encircled the lobby from on high.

The bellboy led her to the fifth floor. He opened the door to her suite and swept his hand toward the center of the room. She crossed the threshold to splendidly furnished lodgings equipped with the most modern of conveniences. A private telephone. A button for summoning service any time, day or night. A luxurious en suite bathroom.

He pointed out that no two rooms in the entire hotel were alike. He apprised her of the amenities common to only the finest of inns, including beauty experts available to assist her in her suite or in the hotel's beauty shop, medical attendants on call twenty-four hours a day, and a resident dentist.

As soon as the bellboy had left, she threw open the drapes to the eastern-facing view of the hotel's Terrace Garden. It reminded her of a tropical Eden. Verdant flora from exotic climes bore witness to the attention to detail that had gone into the creation of this veritable paradise called The Biltmore. Impeccably attired ladies and gentlemen strolled along the walking paths. Sat on the park benches. Engaged in exuberant conversation.

Bordering the garden on the Fifth Street side were the ten-story Biltmore Apartments, reserved for wealthy clientele desirous of more spacious accommodations and proximate quarters for their traveling domestics.

Rosa Ponselle retired early that evening knowing that tomorrow morning, Monday, would come early, bringing with it a full day of social obligations and preparation for her Tuesday matinee performance.

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She awoke to a light rapping at the door. A man called from the hallway. “Miss Ponselle, the pleasure of your company is requested for breakfast in two hours.” She thought she recognized the voice as that of the bellboy who had shown her to her room.

Over the course of Monday, she attended a host of festive events, including a welcome breakfast, a gala luncheon at The Biltmore and, later in the evening, a dinner dance at the Capitol City Club.

She managed to squeeze in time, between the obligatory social events and after the Capitol City dinner dance, for one last round of vocal exercises before the next day’s matinee.

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Tuesday afternoon.

She waited in the wing of the Municipal Auditorium stage. Her heart pounded like a piledriver. Her hands were clammy. The footfalls from her back-and-forth pacing resonated through the offstage chamber. At least they seemed to. Were they really that loud? Or was it her imagination?

The cue came for her to make her entrance. She steeled herself. She pulled back the velour tab drapes and swept onto the stage.

The lights washed over her.

The audience applauded.

Act I. Scene II, “The Garden of the Palace.”

Duchess Leonora, “a noble lady of great beauty,” ambles with her friend Inez through the garden of the royal palace, a locale perhaps not that different from The Biltmore’s luxuriant Terrace Garden. She confides in Inez her abiding passion for an unknown knight she has seen in a recent tournament. She sings of him in “Tacea la notte placida.” (Peaceful was the night.)

Whatever angst Miss Ponselle felt as she stood in the wings, and then before the hopped-up audience, it was not borne of intimidation from the language in which she sang. The daughter of Bernardino Ponzillo and Maddalena Conta, immigrants from Caiazzo, Italy, she was as comfortable with Italian as she was with her native English.

Ascolta.

*Tacea la notte placida
e bella in ciel sereno
La luna il viso argenteo
Mostrava lieto e pieno...
Quando suonar per l'aere,
Infino allor sì muto,
Dolci s'udiro e flebili
Gli accordi d'un liuto,
E versi melanconici
Un Trovator cantò.
Versi di prece ed umile
Qual d'uom che prega Iddio
In quella ripeteasi
Un nome, il nome mio!...*

Listen!

*The serene night was silent
and, lovely in the calm sky,
the moon happily revealed
its silvery and full face!
When, resounding in the air
which till then had been so quiet,
sweet and sad were heard
the sounds of a lute,
and a troubadour
sang some melancholy verses.
Verses, beseeching and humble,
like a man praying to God:
and in them was repeated a
name, my name!*

Scene II ended.

Her anxiety faded as the packed house erupted in thunderous acclamation.

She continued to amaze the rapt patrons through Acts II and III until, in the end, Leonora dies in the hands of her lover.

The crowd bestowed upon the cast a five-minute standing ovation.

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Late Tuesday afternoon, following the matinee performance, Rosa Ponselle and her fellow cast members were feted at an al fresco tea dance in The Biltmore's lush Terrace Garden. A *Constitution* society writer declared, "The brilliance of Ostend's famous Kurhaus and the delights of the flower gardens of Biarritz were fully matched in the assembly that danced beneath the southern skies and zephyr-like breezy atmosphere."

Later that evening, she attended two dinner dances, one in The Biltmore ballroom and one at the Piedmont Driving Club.

The Biltmore ballroom was palatial, patterned after a baronial hall, "suggestive of the richness and splendor of the Elizabethan age with its high-arched windows, its wonderfully decorated walls and ceilings, sparkling crystal chandeliers and exquisite drapery." Each guest was presented with Parisian favors and hand-painted menu cards as keepsakes of the occasion.

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Wednesday morning, she awoke to a copy of the *Constitution* at her door. Her heart raced as she searched, page-by-page, for Enrico Leide's review of the performance the day before. Leide, director of musical presentations at the Atlanta Metropolitan theater, director of the

Atlanta Symphony orchestra, and one of the leading musical authorities in the South, was the newspaper's senior opera critic.

Her eyes landed on the headline on Page 4: POPULAR STARS SCORE TUESDAY IN 'IL TROVATORE'. She went on to read, "Rosa Ponselle gave us as emphatic an interpretation of Leonora as we have ever heard, pouring into that conventional role all the beauty of her opulent voice and the wealth of her majestic figure."

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Rosa Ponselle would return to Atlanta the following year to appear as La Gioconda in Amilcare Ponchielli's opera by the same name, by most accounts the greatest work of his career.

She would come back each year through the mid-'30s, performing in Verdi's "Aida" and "La Forza Del Destino," Meyerbeer's "L'Africaine," and in a reprise of her role as Leonora in "Il Trovatore."

On her annual trips to Atlanta, she would always consider The Biltmore her home away from home.

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In 1927, Rosa Ponselle performed as the eponymous Norma in the Met's New York revival of Bellini's opera, considered one of the most difficult challenges for a soprano. Critics would call it her most noteworthy achievement.

In 1929, she made her debut outside of the US at Covent Garden's Royal Opera House in London, singing the roles of Norma and Gioconda. She returned to London in 1930 and 1931, performing a variety of roles.

She had made a promise to her mother that, one day, she would sing in Italy. That promise was kept when, in 1933, she sang two performances with the Maggio Musicale in Florence, as Giulia in "La vestale."

Rosa Ponselle never performed abroad again.

In April of 1937, she sang in her last operatic performance, as Carmen, in a Met tour of Cleveland, Ohio. She had been struggling for several years with a receding upper register. This struggle, as well as disagreements with Met management over her repertoire and her continuing performance anxiety, led to her retirement after an operatic career that lasted two decades.

She said that, in retirement, she never missed performing. But she still managed to stay involved, recording a variety of songs for RCA Victor and contributing to the growth of the Baltimore Civic Opera Company, where she coached young singers, including Beverly Sills and Plácido Domingo.

In 1981, after a hard-fought battle with bone marrow cancer, Rosa Ponsell died at Villa Pace, the Italianate home near Baltimore that she had built in 1940 with her husband at the time, Carle Jackson. She was 84. Her final resting place is in nearby Druid Ridge Cemetery.

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Villa Pace's architects had designed the estate to Rosa Ponselle's exacting specifications. While its overarching architectural style is different from that of The Biltmore, the villa's elegance and refinement, its elaborate interior detailing, its exquisite furnishings, tapestries and statuary, are reminiscent of Atlanta's grand hotel.