



A Night at the Opera, with

At Prince Orlofsky's ball, Alfred (Ragnar Ulfung) unknowingly flirts with his own wife, Rosalinda (Dame Joan Sutherland), in the San Francisco Opera 1973 production of Johann Strauss's *Die Fledermaus*.

**A pooch-propelled buggy
in a supermarket parking lot
leads a young boy to
grand opera, romance, and
a lifelong passion.**

By Brian Patrick Duggan



Your child is pictured here enjoying a ride in the world famous Calo Dog Cart.

The rugged beast pulling the cart is a 35 inch, 145 pound dog known as an Irish Wolfhound. His name is O'LAC O'DAY, and he is a perfect example of the type of dog used in Europe, England and Ireland as a wolf killer, companion in battle and draft animal for more than 1500 years.

The heavy work done by O'LAC O'DAY each day demands a hearty diet. For his entire life he has been nourished by an average of four pounds of CALO Dog Food each day.

Brian and Kevin Duggan first met the hound of Irish legend in a dog-food promotional stunt.

Although born and raised in Ireland, my father never saw an Irish Wolfhound until he came to America. Young Jim Duggan actually had seen one on the Irish sixpence, but he thought it was a Greyhound. Dad wasn't much into dogs, but he did tell my mother, Betty, were we ever to have a dog, it would be a Wolfhound—and that was fine, as she was definitely a dog person.

Fast-forward to 1973 with my mother, brothers, and I backstage at the San Francisco Opera with two Wolfhounds formerly owned by a genuine rock star.

Jim Duggan posing sternly as lord of the manor with General and Bran.



Wolfhounds

Our first family experience with Irish Wolfhounds happened in 1957 at a supermarket in Novato, California. The Calo Dog Food company had an advertising gimmick where children were given rides in a cart pulled by a Wolfhound, whose size and strength were a "testimony" to the quality of their product. This was too good pass up, so my brother Kevin and I (he was 1 and I was 4) went for a dog-powered ride in the parking lot.

That was the first link in the Duggan-Irish Wolfhound chain.

A year later we moved 40 miles south to San Bruno, where my brothers and I grew up with the first of our dogs, a Collie named Mike. When I was 13, I babysat for a family who had Weenus, a Dachshund, and Brutus, an Irish Wolfhound. The family eventually decided they were not the best home for a giant dog and Brutus came to live with us. Sadly, in 1969, he suffered a gastric torsion. When I wasn't in school, I stayed with Brutus at the clinic, and helped out. The day after he was released, a blood clot broke loose and clogged an artery. Within minutes, our first Irish Wolfhound was gone.

Mom and Dad thought we needed another Wolfhound and we bought a puppy that year from renowned breeder, Mary Major (Major Acres Kennels), and called him Bran. Around the same time, I was offered a job as kennel boy at the vet's clinic. Through our veterinarian, we met Coraline, an Australian flight attendant, who worked for Pan Am. She and Brendan Behan, her magnificent jet-black Wolfhound, became good friends with our family.

Coraline brought us back a puppy from Ireland, whom we named Niamh ("ni-ev"), which means "radiance" in Gaelic.

Faire-Weather Wanders

In addition to dog shows and St. Patrick's Day parades, the two hounds went on family outings with us, but it was a chance trip to the original Renaissance Faire in Marin County in 1970 that upped my ante on Wolfhounds. One of the courtiers spotted our hounds and invited me to join Goode Queen Bess's entourage. With a borrowed tunic, I became the Master of the Hounds. Cries of "Make way! Make way for the Queen's Hounds!" parted the throng and we marched by to the surprise and wonderment of the crowd.

The theater of it was marvelous, and the Faire satisfied my teenage need for excitement—not to mention girls in fetching, low-cut costumes who loved the Wolfhounds (the phrase "chick-magnet" had yet to be coined, but that's what they were).

A talented seamstress, Mom made me a huntsman costume, and from 1971 to 1974 I made the trip to Novato with up to four Wolfhounds in my red Ford convertible several weekends each year. All day, I fielded questions about their breed, size, weight, diet, history, and even an unconventional offer of seduction, which, for the record, was declined.

Meanwhile, our vet had gotten some new clients, pets of the famous funk-rock band, Sly and the Family Stone ("Dance to the Music," "Everyday People," "Hot Fun in the Summertime").

Sly, Freddie, and Rose Stone lived with their parents in San Francisco and had several dogs, including General, an Irish Wolfhound, and a Schipperke named Satan. In 1970, Sly hired me, and my best friend, Don, to clean up



One of the proper touches of the parade was the appearance of the proud and graceful Irish wolfhounds, such as those with Brina Duggan.



Die Fledermaus, ACT III, San Francisco, 1975. Walter Slevak was an endearing and amusing Prosch but his ad-lib made each performance a little longer.

Pages from the author's scrapbook brim with larger-than-life memories of human and canine stars. Below: Duggan with one of his hounds at the Renaissance Faire.

after the dogs when the band was on tour.

Thanks to the deft dog-poop handling, we Duggans—Mom, my brothers Kevin and Sean, and me with a date—were invited to sit backstage at concerts. My dates were normally out of my league, but backstage with Sly Stone was a great dating equalizer. We babysat the drummer's dogs—Papa and Deke, a feisty Bull Terrier and placid Saint Bernard—and Freddie and I became friendly. He asked my help in choosing a Wolfhound puppy, to be named Daiquiri.

Freddie eventually realized that the rock-and-roll lifestyle did not mix with dogs, so in late 1971 he gave General and Daiquiri to us, bringing our pack up to four IWs and Donovan, a Basset Hound. Sly and the band faded from our lives, but Freddie's dogs upped our next ante.

Onstage with a Great Dame

So far, the hounds had been at historical costume events, Irish parades, and rock concerts. The next episode took us completely by surprise.

In the comic opera *Die Fledermaus* there is a grand ball hosted by the extravagant Prince Orlofsky. The character usually has a monocle and a very long cigarette holder to suggest wealthy eccentricity. One of the San Francisco Opera's staff spotted my brothers and I walking the dogs in our neighborhood. He suggested to director Lofti Mansouri that the giant hounds could be Orlofsky's extravagant prop. Our dogs were to be opera stars.

We selected General and Daiquiri, as they had proved unflappable at the Renaissance Faire, and figured they ought to be at ease with hooped ball gowns, spotlights, and an orchestra. We loaded the hounds into our Volkswagen van and drove to the War Memorial Opera House for an audition. Prince Orlofsky is generally played by a mezzo-soprano and in this performance it was Madame Huguette Tourangeau—a famous singer from Montreal. General and Daiquiri took an instant liking to Madame and she to them, calling the great beasts *Mes petits choux* ("My little cabbages").

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE/COURTESY AUTHOR; FROM THE JOAN SUTHERLAND ALBUM BY JOAN SUTHERLAND AND RICHARD BORTNAGE (1986)/COURTESY SAN FRANCISCO OPERA; THE MONITOR/COURTESY AUTHOR

Being neophytes to opera, the fact that the famous Dame Joan Sutherland and Ragnar Ulfung played Rosalinda and Alfred meant little to us. However, we met Bruce Yarnell, a Broadway baritone who also acted in movies and television Westerns, and Walter Slezak, a film actor who played the comic role of the tipsy jailor. Unknown to us, Slezak was a great man for dogs, and admired our Wolfhounds. His gracious manners and gentle humor made a strong impression on me and, even though our dogs' part was over shortly into Act II, we always stayed to the end to hear the arias and his ad-libs.

The Wolfhounds' bit was to wait with us behind the ballroom set with Madame Tourangeau as the curtain went up on Act II. Madame would enter center stage with the hounds and walk through the guests to the footlights, acknowledge the applause, and then hand the leashes to a butler who would lead them off stage right. Kevin or I would wait in the wings to bring them quietly backstage.

All went well in dress rehearsal, and Mr. Mansouri, a stout, bald Iranian with black frame glasses, sighed in relief.

On opening night, everything seemed to be going according to plan. There was a fenced lawn by the building's loading dock, where we could walk the dogs during Act I. Someone from the crew summoned us in good time to get backstage and let the dogs settle with Madame Tourangeau, whose Orlofsky costume was a white military tunic with pelisse worn over the shoulder, a red sash, black trousers, and a man's dark wig. In partial darkness, she chatted amiably with us and cooed at her *petits choux*. The company received the starting cue and the crowd's intermission murmur subsided. The proscenium curtain went up, and from behind the rear curtain we could see the array of spotlights twinkling through the set.

Madame held the leash while we steadied the dogs and prevented their tails from enthusiastically whacking the curtain—which could be seen from the audience. There was a short song and introductory dialogue before the majordomo boomed, "His Royal Highness, Prince Orlofsky!" And with that, Madame Tourangeau and Wolfhounds stepped onto the brightly lit stage.

At first, silence. Then a ripple of laughter. Mom, Kevin, Sean, and I looked at each other—what had gone wrong? Had the dogs committed some unspeakable transgression? Was a mop needed on stage? Or worse, a shovel?

Suddenly, there was applause and then quiet, when we could hear the dogs' feet scuffling on stage. I hurried around to collect them from the butler who was practically dragged off scene. Another scattering of laughter and applause preceded Orlofsky's first line. Madame's whole entrance took 28 seconds—a long time on stage

with no dialogue or music. I hustled General and Daiquiri off to the waiting area. We could not imagine what our dogs had done and were worried that they had spoiled the performance—however I thought it couldn't have gone too badly if the opera was still underway.

Paw Prints in Perpetuity

The San Francisco Opera's archives contain no video recording of the 1973 performance of *Die Fledermaus*. But, audio of all three acts can be heard on YouTube. Just over three minutes into Act II, you can hear Madame Tourangeau's entrance with General and Daiquiri, the audience's reaction, and the dogs' tails clicking on stage:
youtube.com/watch?v=NAVgdPbUWTS.

So why had the audience laughed at the dogs? Mom sought out the director. "But they laugh for joy!" Mr. Mansouri reassured us. "No one expects such dogs in opera and the audience is delighted with surprise." This was an immense relief and for the next five nights, "the little cabbages" set the mood for the second act.

Theater critics were enthusiastic, and although the four-legged stars were shockingly neglected in their reviews, they were clearly a good idea. In 2006, the company brought *Die Fledermaus* back for the fourth time since 1973. In that version, Prince Orlofsky had a brace of Borzoi.

I think back to that chance sighting of an Irish Wolfhound in a supermarket parking lot and the chain of events that led us to *Die Fledermaus*. Could General and Daiquiri's appearance on stage have started a similar cascade of dominos for someone in the audience? It's certainly possible. Erika Slezak (an actor in her own right and fellow dog fancier) was in the audience those nights and, because of the Wolfhounds and this story, Erika and I connected and she was kind enough to share warm memories of her father with me.

Our Wolfhounds had one other lasting effect in my life. They had led me to the Renaissance Faire and it was there I met my wife, Wendy—who made a more conventional offer of seduction (accepted). 🐾

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