



FOREIGN POLICY ASSOCIATION

www.fpa.org

FPA Town Hall

Remarks by Peter Gelb

Thursday, May 31, 2012, 6:30 p.m. – 9:30 p.m.

The Pierre Hotel, 2 East 61st Street at Fifth Avenue, New York, NY

Featuring:

Peter Gelb

MR. PETER GELB: Thank you, Deborah. You are one of my very favorite divas, as well as a fellow survivor of The Met's new Ring cycle. As you may have noticed our Ring was not entirely without controversy so I'm especially grateful to receive this prestigious award since after last week my diplomacy skills might be considered a work in progress.

I have always believed in learning from one's mistakes. And I've also learned many important lessons over my career. When as a young man I was managing the great pianist, Vladimir Horowitz, he taught me the value of acoustics. He said, if the check is good, acoustics are good. He also taught me how to read a menu in an expensive restaurant from right to left, like Hebrew, he explains.

With Horowitz, I had one of my first cultural adventures in foreign policy and diplomacy. In 1985, as Reagan and Gorbachev began their rapprochement with the signing of a cultural exchange agreement, the first event was to be a concert in Moscow by Horowitz. Convincing Horowitz to return to Russia was not easily accomplished since as one of the conditions of his historic visit he insisted that his nightly menu of Dover sole and asparagus be guaranteed in Moscow as well.

During the Cold War in Russia this was not a simple matter since Horowitz, who my no means was a normal person, genuinely believed that he couldn't survive without his Dover sole, it was up to the American Ambassador at the time, Arthur Hartman, to negotiate with the British Ambassador for the airlifting of Dover sole into Moscow and with the Italian Ambassador for flights of fresh asparagus.

Even with all these ambassadorial arrangements it took the personal intervention of Secretary of State George Shultz and our President himself to relieve Horowitz's last minute anxieties. Just weeks before the scheduled visit Horowitz threatened to cancel after learning that the KGB had damaged the piano inside the Ambassador's own residence. In response, Reagan wrote a reassuring letter to Horowitz delivered by White House courier in which he promised the safeguarding of Horowitz and his piano, which was being flown in for the occasion by having the piano accompanied and guarded by members of the US Marine Corps. It's a true story.

Once in Moscow, the apparatchiks of Soviet television, - - Radio and the State Concert Bureau, Gast [phonetic] Concerts, wouldn't sign our contract and at the border with Poland blocked the entry of the television truck and equipment with which we were going to produce the concert live to an eagerly awaiting audience across the globe.

Ambassador Hartman suggested that we use the preferred method of delivering an ultimatum to the Soviets, which was to have a staged conversation in one of the many bugged hallways of his residence, Spaso House where we were all staying. After explaining to the Ambassador in a theatrical whisper that Horowitz and his entourage were prepared to exit without performing the Soviet officials, who had been listening carefully, immediately summoned me to their office and signed the contract, since they now feared that they would be held responsible for sabotaging the cultural exchange agreement that Gorbachev himself had endorsed.

With this experience and a few others under my belt I thought I was prepared to go to work for The Met, the world's largest performing arts company in size and budget when I was asked to become the sixteenth General Manager. At the time I took the reins in 2006 The Met was suffering from a reputation for operatic conservatism and its audience was aging and declining.

Changing the course of such a venerable institution, although critical to its very survival, was not easily accomplished. In my early days, one of the staff stage directors, in fact, explained the seeming impossibility of my mission. Welcome to the medieval world of The Met, he said. But together with my equally determined colleagues and the support of an enlightened board we accomplished the unthinkable, a Metropolitan Opera House that began to embrace new artistic ideas and technology to meet the theatrical demands of the 21st Century, while honoring the great musical traditions of the past.

From the start we announced the platform of change, more new productions by the best theater directors than ever before, widening of the repertoire and our educational efforts, and opening The Met up to the world by making it more accessible through a broad range of public programs. From live transmissions of our opening nights in Times Square to free attendance at dress rehearsals we began a gentle revolution in an effort to win new audiences while aiming to keep the older opera loyalists on board as well.

Six seasons later we have stayed this course with actions and deeds that have honored our early promises. Today The Met is often cited as a model for the possibilities of change, even for the oldest and most established institutions. Of course, making meaningful change is not a simple walk in the park. And in my single minded determination I have made some mistakes too, like the one reported in The Times last week.

By far, The Met's most visible success story though, has been its live HD transmissions to movie theaters, as Deborah reported, which required considerable diplomacy at its inception. But by gaining the approbation of the stars and the unions we were able to launch this unusual experiment in 2008. At the time, this attempt to broadcast our performances live into movie theaters around the world seemed to me like it might work, since The Met had also been the arts pioneer on radio with its live Saturday matinee broadcasts which had begun almost eighty years earlier.

Today, we have achieved an annual global movie theater audience four times the size of our audience inside the opera house. For twenty dollars you can see grand opera and eat a hot dog or some popcorn too. Now, The Met, thank you, no hot dogs here tonight, so... Now The Met has a paying audience equal to our namesakes playing ball at City Field.

From the West Coast of North America to Jerusalem and Moscow, as Deborah pointed out, spanning twelve different time zones, our audiences are united in real time. Since the transmissions are seen by hundreds of thousands of opera lovers in one showing it represents a kind of one stop shopping for the top stars of the world. With stars like Deborah Voigt, who know that an HD performance on the stage of The Met reaches most corners of the world. And for opera fans grouped together in movie theaters it is a stimulating artistic and social experience.

Why else would audience members in movie theaters choose to applaud far out of range of the opera singer's ears but to let each other know what has pleased them. At a time when most recent world trends seem to be threatening to our lives or our livelihoods, this is one brand of globalism that makes people feel happily enriched and culturally connected.

Finally, I would like to leave you with this recent operatic riddle perhaps thought up by an unusually clever tenor with an awareness of foreign policy. What is the difference between a terrorist and a soprano? You can negotiate with a terrorist. Deborah, of course, it wasn't meant for you. Thank you, thank you very much.