



On Golden Wings

a play in one act by A. Giovanni Affinito

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Characters

Bartolomeo Merelli, an impresario

Giuseppe Verdi, a young composer

The action occurs in Milano, Italy on a winter evening in 1841

(The curtain rises in darkness. "Va Pensiero Sull; ali Dorate," {Go thought, on Golden Wings}. A chorus from Giuseppe Verdi's opera, "Nabucco" is heard softly for a few bars, then diminishes to silence as a pin spot comes up on Bartolomeo Merelli. He is in his late thirties with dark, good looks and just beginning to go fat. Elegantly dressed in evening clothes he meticulously picks lint from his opera cape and adjusts his white silk scarf. He notices the audience.)

MERELLI

Well, no one said it was going to be one of those upstart plays with seedy characters. {Removes his top hat with a flourish} Bartolomeo Merelli, Inspector General of the Royal and Imperial Austro-Hungarian Theatres, and OH I adore my job. How many of you can say that? I'm good at it too and save for occasional quick fornicating in the wings, I work hard. But you know, I'm constantly gnawed by the fear that after I'm gone, no one will remember that...or me. Enough! Actually, this evening we're concerned with a rather bearish fellow from the sticks. An Italian like me from the north, under Austrian rule.

(The lights come up dimly on a drab, sparsely furnished room. UL a door leading to the street, a coat stand by the entrance. UC a battered piano. RC a wooden table with three chairs. DR a soft glow from a small wood burning stove. An oil lamp on the table.)

?

He lives here in a poor section of Milano. I know, it doesn't exactly shout with charm. I wouldn't abide it for an overnight. He is down on his luck, as they say, a victim of chance. After all, the nineteenth century is a time of uncertainty...like any other time.

(The door opens to reveal the gaunt figure of 27 year old Giuseppe Verdi. His face, thin with a large nose is moustached and short bearded. His black hair touseled by a strong wind, grows beneath his ears in the style of the time. He strikes a match and lights the oil lamp.)

MERELLI {CONT.}

That's him, Giuseppe Verdi{on his way out} I shall be back so...remember me.

(Verdi removes his coat and muffler and hangs them on the coat stand. He glances at a large book on the piano, moves to it and flicks the pages to a marked place. He reads aloud.)

VERDI

Go, thought, on golden wings.

(a knock at the door)

Yes, yes, who is it?

VOICE (OFF)

Is the Maestro receiving tonight?

VERDI

But...who's there? Who are you?

VOICE

Oh, come along Verdi, let me in. I'm on my way home from the theatre and it's damned cold. I saw your lamp. It's Merelli.

VERDI

(with some reluctance)

Ah, a moment (He nervously runs his hands through his hair and straightens his clothes, then opens the door to Merelli.)

MERELLI

(entering, stamping his feet)

DIO, it's cold out there. I just want to warm up. These Milanese winters are as cold and ugly as the the Springs are beautiful. Am I disturbing you?

(removes his hat)

VERDI

No, no, no. Your cape?

(he accepts Merelli's cape and hat. Hangs them on the stand.)

MERELLI

You see? You can't hide from me. I know where you live.

VERDI

I came in just five minutes ago.

(An awkward silence)

MERELLI

I, uh, I'm just here for a minute. To warm up.

VERDI

I know. You just said so. Is it really so cold?

MERELLI

You were out there. Couldn't you tell?

VERDI

I didn't notice.

MERELLI

But I see you had a fire going.

VERDI

Habit, I suppose.

MERELLI

Well, don't let me keep you from work. I'll be gone in a minute.

VERDI

Hah! Work? You're not keeping me from that believe me. That's a habit I've given up. And you know that very well.

MERELLI

You're keeping the habit of lighting a fire to warm a cold you say you don't feel? But, not the habit of working?

VERDI

That's right.

MERELLI

(Warming his hands by the stove)
Isn't it strange, the way we keep our mundane habits. The little routine things of little consequence that we do over and over again? And how ephemeral our better habits become. Suddenly, pouf, they fly away, like smoke from a burnt out wick.

(He stares at Verdi. There is tension between them. An air of expectation.)

MERELLI

(continuing)
Did you read it?

VERDI

Yes. Some of it.

MERELLI

Beautiful eh?

VERDI

Very beautiful.

MERELLI

Well, then, put it to music.

VERDI

No. Never. I told you, I want no part of it.

MERELLI

Put it to music, put it to music.

VERDI

Why?

MERELLI

Why? Because I need it that's why.

VERDI

But I don't.

MERELLI

Yes, you do. We both need it. I may even put it on in Carnival Season when Streponi and Ronconi can sing it.

VERDI

(More surprise than real interest)
Those singers? You would give me the best singers, in the best season?

MERELLI

Well...if I gave it in Carnival Season. I can't promise that.

VERDI

Of course. I see. What you want is my promise to write it. You, of course, are not expected to make any promises.

MERELLI

We'll see. We'll see. You have no understanding of this business. I've already accepted three operas by popular composers for that season. To give a fourth by a near beginner would be...dangerous. Especially for you.

VERDI

There won't be any danger at all because I can tell you frankly that I certainly don't need to write another opera, so don't think you're teasing me about it. I've stopped composing. I'm going to teach. So I have no reason to dicker about singers or popular seasons.

MERELLI

(Sits at the table)

Now calm down and I'll tell you what. I can promise you a premiere the following spring. You know we need a few novelties for the regular season. That's really why I need it. Set the libretto and I'll put it on.

VERDI

And put me on the rack again? There are so many others. Too many. There always has, and I suppose there always will be too many composers. Just forget about this one.

MERELLI

Verdi, why in hell do you think I'm here tonight?

VERDI

To warm your hands.

MERELLI

Don't play with me. I'm not just anybody you know. You're not speaking to one of your cronies from the sticks.

VERDI

You're right of course. I'm just a country bumpkin who's studied hard, who had no thought for anything but music. My own family came second. Even my wife, well, the only luxuries she ever had were a few miserable gold trinkets which she sold to pay the rent when I was sick. So, Merelli, why don't you just let me alone?

MERELLI

Keep on working. The luxuries will come in time.

VERDI

My God, did you hear what I said? They don't matter. She's gone now, and the children with her. I've lost any appetite I might have had for that kind of indulgence.

MERELLI

Oh, come now. Ha hah, I'll wager you would be glad to exchange your sack cloth for a fancy new coat, and indulge yourself in a bit of luxury. Even a hermit like you.

VERDI

No I don't have the nobility of a hermit. My life has become a trashy novel with no moral. I don't want anything close to me ever again. I don't want anything to touch me.

MERELLI

Work, Verdi. Let your work carry you on wings
of..uh..what was it?

VERDI

(Points to piano)
Wings of gold. Very pretty indeed.

MERELLI

Entrancing, with the right music supporting that
flight.

(Crosses to piano and picks up book)
Just think about it. Nabucco, a magnificent
libretto. Thrills by the dozen. Extraordinary!
Grandise! Dramatic situations. Beautiful verses
and...

VERDI

(Rises applauding)
Bravo. Bravissimo! Why in hell don't you write it
then?

MERELLI

I would if I could, believe me.

VERDI

No. I wouldn't want to sully this magnificent
libretto with my poor music.

MERELLI

Will you at least admit it's a good book?

VERDI

I already said it was.

MERELLI

And the words are important no? As important as the
music?

VERDI

What's the sense in chewing on that old rag? I no
longer know what's important.

MERELLI

I'll tell you. Writers are important.

(Slams book onto table)
I like you Verdi. God knows you're a crank and
you're all sucked up with yourself. You can't see
anyone's misfortunes but your own.

VERDI

Thank you. I needed that cheering up. Please forgive my discourtesy to the music of the Italian syllables, but, so far, they haven't bought my macaroni.

MERELLI

You're really wearing my patience.

VERDI

Good.

MERELLI

Impresarios don't normally go around importuning young unknowns you know. Not every day.

VERDI

Why today, Merelli, why me?

MERELLI

Well, to be quite truthful...

VERDI

(Bowing in mock reverence)
Ahhh, the truth.

MERELLI

Actually, I'm in an awful fix. I haven't lied about needing the opera for the spring. I'd already offered this libretto to Nicolai....

VERDI

And?

MERELLI

He refused it. Said it was anti musical. Impossible.

VERDI

(Sits heavily)
So, naturally you came straight to me. The anti musical composer.

MERELLI

No. I came here because you're good.

VERDI

But not as good as Nicolai.

MERELLI

I didn't say that.

VERDI

You went to him first.

MERELLI

I do as I please. I don't have to answer to you.

VERDI

Of course you don't. Why are you really here anyway?

MERELLI

I told you. I came because...you're good. What happened to you last year has happened to many good composers before. Don't misunderstand.

VERDI

(Outburst)

Why did they, they, THEY misunderstand? I didn't look for applause. The opera was not good. The final curtain, a shroud. It wasn't applause I wanted, just silence. I would have been grateful for their silence. Yes, I would have thanked them for it, publicly.

MERELLI

You should have listened for the silences. You only heard the hisses and howls.

VERDI

Oh, I didn't expect them to be entangled in my personal misery, exaggerated as it was. Even more than the confused farce they were hooting at. But I count for something don't I? There are limits Merelli, there are limits.

MERELLI

(Laughs nervously)

This is the way of the public. The opera did not please, and they let us know it.

VERDI

Us. US? The din they made was mashing MY guts.

MERELLI

(leafs through the book)

Count it as a severe lesson in this mad business.

VERDI

What lesson?

MERELLI

Not to condemn the public, or hold them responsible for the event in which a work is produced. Now can you Verdi? In all fairness.