Neil Shicoff as Eléazar in the Vienna Staatsoper's production of Halévy's *La juive*, 2003

NEIL SHICOFF
A Force for 40 Years

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

photo by Axel Zeininger

Tenor Neil Shicoff has graced the stages of all of the leading opera houses in major roles the world over. Now he is bringing all of that experience to a new role: teacher. His practical pedagogical approach includes sharing his own life lessons with his students. Shicoff shares many of those lessons here, including how he dealt with performance anxiety, what roles he wishes he would have waited to sing, why students need to remember that their teacher is working for them, and much more in this exclusive interview.

When Neil Shicoff was a young singer at Juilliard, he had what he felt were high hopes for a career in opera. "I thought, well, if I get 20 years, that's fantastic," he says. "That was the hallmark of what I was looking for."

Forty years later, after countless acclaimed performances at the world's most celebrated opera houses, he is widely considered to be the preeminent American tenor of his generation, if not of multiple generations.

As he approaches his 70th birthday, Shicoff continues to be an international draw—but now as a teacher for opera companies and apprentice programs. As he increasingly turns his time and attention to teaching, he relies on his experience as a performer when guiding the next generation of opera singers.

Playing the Long Game

Careers in opera cannot be sustained without careful attention to which roles to choose and which to avoid at various points in a singer's development. In this regard, Shicoff admits to taking a conventional, if not conservative, approach. "I chose things very late, actually," he says. "I did *Tosca* at 40, *Carmen* at 40, *Pagliacci* at like 63, which was really late." He waited even longer for his first *Turandot* at age 65, though he admits that may have been too late.

Still, erring on the side of caution has served him well, and Shicoff credits this approach to longtime manager and mentor Matthew Epstein. Over the course of Shicoff's career, they would continually discuss which roles to take on and which to leave on the shelf—a process that is not always followed as carefully today. "I think today the marketplace for singers is much more fast food oriented," he says. "You've got intendants and managers who are pushing their young singers rather quickly."

Even when left to their own devices, young singers often voluntarily take on repertoire that may not suit them, as Shicoff discovers with his own students. He recalls a 23-year-old bass who brought in an aria from Verdi's *Ernani*. Though the singer had solid technique for his young age, Shicoff questioned his choice of repertoire. "Why are you singing this aria?" he asked the student. "I sang this opera about a hundred times. I just think this is way too early at your age. Why are you not doing the Mozart repertoire that you can excel in enough to build the longevity into the career?"

The questions were not out of left field. Shicoff had personal experience

singing the title role in *Ernani* before he was truly ready for it. In 1975, Shicoff was asked to perform the role, even though the young tenor was only in his mid 20s. Understanding it was beyond Shicoff's professional development at the time, he was offered the contract contingent upon his willingness to coach the role with Eugene Kohn to get it into his voice. "I had to work a lot of hours with him. That was fascinating—to work with musicians who were broader and had more spark of genius than I did at the time. I learned a lot. . . . It was too heavy for me, but it was an entrée to meet one of the greatest conductors of my career."

While that gamble paid off, Shicoff waited after those first performances in 1975 and did not sing the role a second time until he was in his 40s.

Hindsight reveals other potentially questionable repertoire choices.

photo by Axel Zeininger

Shicoff as the title role in the Vienna Staatsoper's production of *Don Carlo*, 1999

Epstein recently confided to Shicoff that he probably pushed him too early into his first runs as Hoffmann, a role he debuted at age 30. Though it would eventually become one of Shicoff's signature roles, he believes now he should have waited longer before taking the stage in such a "treacherous" part. "I love Hoffmann," he says,

Shicoff as the title role in the Vienna Staatsoper's production of *Werther*, 2007

photo by Axel Zeininger

Shicoff as Eléazar in the Vienna Staatsoper's production of *La juive*, 2003

"but it's written in a very difficult way."

And every choice comes with consequences. For Shicoff, this meant he frequently cancelled performances. While he believes some of these cancellations were due to his own high expectations for his performances and to his being "a nervous singer," he also needed the time for his voice to recuperate from singing these heavy roles. "I was 31, I think, when I was singing with Renata Scotto at the Met in *Adriana Lecouvreur*, and that is not a light piece," he says. "If I was in the correct repertoire, [cancelling] wasn't an issue."

Even so, with a star on the rise, high-profile engagements can be difficult to turn down. "A tenor colleague of mine recently said to me, 'You started too early, too young, and you zoomed too fast. It didn't really give you time to understand what the pressures were going to be.' Yeah, I suppose."

Performance Anxiety

These pressures, along with a naturally nervous personality type, would lead Shicoff to an ongoing battle with performance anxiety. In fact, he barely remembers his Metropolitan Opera debut because of it. At age 27, he was singing Rinuccio in *Gianni Schicchi*, which he calls "a nice part" but "a hard part for a young tenor." It may not have helped that he was performing alongside "all-time big stars."

Shicoff does remember being in the latter part of the show and mentally reminding himself to keep

photo by Axel Zeininger

his breath calm since his aria would be coming up soon. The only problem was he had already sung the aria. "I got good reviews, as I recall, and it was a springboard for me, but I didn't remember it," he says. "It's like when someone's in a car crash and you say, 'What happened?' and they say, 'I don't know.' That's what my debut was like."

He is amazed by the many colleagues with whom he shared the stage who seemingly had no performance anxiety whatsoever, like Samuel Ramey and Bryn Terfel. "I did joint concerts with Bryn in the Hollywood Bowl and at the Met, and he would be on the side of the stage chatting with the stagehands and I would be in my dressing room pacing," he says.

Shicoff describes acting as if he were wearing horse blinders, forcing himself to focus only on the task in front of him, even if it sometimes gave the impression that he was rude or difficult to work with. "[Terfel] could talk with everybody, be a super human being, and then just walk out onstage at an incredible level of performing talent and skills. It was different for me."

He brings those experiences with performance anxiety to his teaching now, offering his students a perspective that was hard earned in his own career. "If I have students in the situation of a high-profile premiere and they're very nervous," he says, "I talk to them as to what I went through and that the sun will rise the day after that premiere and that things will move forward."

A Student of the Voice

Moving from singing to teaching was a natural shift for Shicoff, in part because he has always been a dedicated student of the voice himself. Beginning with his days at Juilliard, he learned to view the voice as a puzzle. Each new teacher and each new experience might offer a new piece to the puzzle that can bring clarity to the overall picture.

In one specific case, Shicoff recalls hearing a baritone who was singing with the New York City Opera. This baritone had such ease and color in one particular note—an F—that Shicoff found out who the singer's teacher

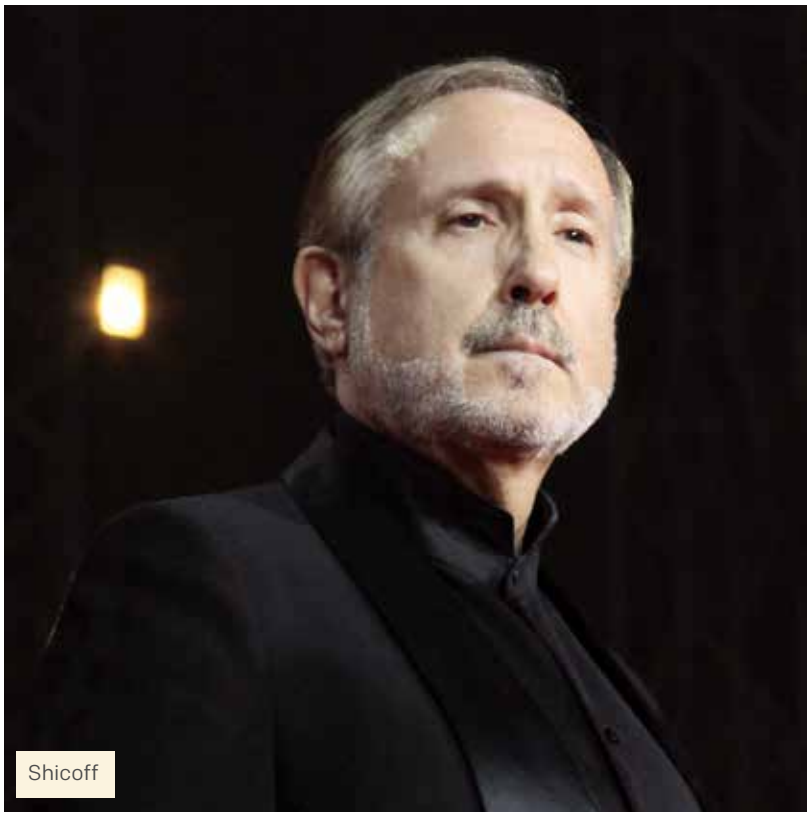

photo by Gennady Avramenko

Shicoff

was so he could take lessons in the hopes of gaining that same skill.

He also credits his wife, Dawn, for offering important critiques. A singer with a long career herself, she would often sit at the side of the stage during his performances to observe him up close in order to offer informed reflections on his singing.

Even on vacations, Shicoff was never completely at rest. "Much to my wife's chagrin, my coach took holidays with us," he says. "We had an apartment in Spain, and Dawn would say to me, 'Let's go for two weeks and relax. Just two weeks!' And I'd say, 'No, I need my coach. I need to work.' It's kind of an OCD obsession."

Case in point: after opening night as Eléazar in *La juive* at the Vienna Staatsoper—another signature role for Shicoff—Ioan Holender, the director of the company, approached the tenor with high praise, saying, "I don't think you know what you did tonight." Shicoff's reply? "To be honest, I just went back to the apartment and the next day I was coaching again."

"I was driven by that quest," he says. "It really was an obsession, a total obsession for me."

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Building Singers and CEOs

Now Shicoff is obsessed with building technique and artistry in others. In doing so, his first obligation is honesty about what he thinks about a student's voice production. Though he does not believe being honest necessitates being brutal, honesty allows him to more quickly address technical issues in what is often limited time.

He does this in part by asking lots of questions. "I always say to the students when I begin with them: tell me how you support, tell me how you sing, tell me your position. Do you sing forward? Do you lift your soft palate? What do you do? I hear it as soon as they sing but I need them to articulate it."

Then, when singers adjust an aspect of their technique and it results in a positive change, Shicoff says, "Tell me what you just did." He wants them to verbalize what they are doing, believing that technique is about the ability to not just *make* the sound that they want but to *repeat* the sound that they want.

Shicoff also hopes to empower his students by encouraging them to take charge of their own development, allowing them final say in their technical choices. When peppering them with questions, he says, "Don't give me the answer that's *my* answer. This is about *your* technique. You're the boss."

He reinforces this idea in the way he views his role and responsibility as a teacher. "I say this to the kids: 'I'm working for you.' And they look at me and say, 'But you're Neil Shicoff!' And I say, 'Wait, wait, wait!' When I was a student . . . I felt the teachers were working for me . . . I was the CEO of my corporation and I made the ultimate decision of who I would stay with."

He reminds students that he will bring them his ideas, but they

photo by Axel Zeininger

Shicoff as Lensky in Vienna Staatsoper's production of *Eugene Onegin*, 1999

Shicoff as the title role in Vienna Staatsoper's production of *Peter Grimes*, 1996

determine whether to accept those ideas or not. "You're the captain. You must make the final decision."

International Influence

As in his performance career, Shicoff did not spend much time climbing the ranks as a teacher, either. He has already been engaged on multiple continents, in cities like Beijing, Sochi, London, Frankfurt, Berlin, and Toronto. He has served as artist in residence at the Juilliard School of Music, and this season he will begin work at the Metropolitan Opera's Lindemann Young Artist Development Program. He also has return engagements with the Washington National Opera's Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist Program, the Santa Fe Opera, and the Bolshoi Opera, among others.

Despite these high-profile positions, teaching is still a relatively new pursuit for him. While many singers give public masterclasses at various points in their career, Shicoff opted instead to stay focused on his own singing, fearing that trying to squeeze masterclasses into his already packed schedule might exhaust him for his performances.

Still, he remembers the technical issues he experienced as a young singer. He even employs some of the same strategies he used to help his students overcome the same hurdles. "Even though I was in the Met at 27, I still had the same problems as these 25- to 26-year-olds have in these programs," he says. "We all have had to work through these issues to figure out what was correct and what to do."

photo by Gottfried Helnwein

Knowing his one-time tendency to push through repertoire that was too heavy for his young, developing voice, he is extremely vigilant in helping his students avoid the same temptation. "When I teach now, I'm the first to say to a singer, 'I need you to get to a certain point where you're releasing your voice.' If I find that you're pushing, I will tell you. And I often will say to a singer, 'No, that's pushed. That's not a release, that's a push.'"

Listen, Listen, Listen

Shicoff requires all the students he works with to audio record their lessons. He believes singers must incorporate their own aural analysis alongside their internal sensation and muscle coordination when singing; therefore, listening to their own voices is an important tool for instilling positive change.

He tells the story of working with a young singer in Glyndebourne who was demonstrating a significant improvement in his sound in a masterclass. "Do you like that?" Shicoff asked. The student merely shrugged his shoulders. "If you don't enjoy or accept or at least appreciate that there is a change," Shicoff replied, "you're not going to hold onto it."

When these changes occur, he encourages students to listen to the recording of their singing within at least 24–48 hours. "If you'll listen, you will know what your muscles did, you'll know what your body did, you'll know how you supported your sound," he says. "If you wait a week and you listen to this and you like it, you won't know what you did. You won't remember."

To help students understand how long it can take to incorporate

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technical changes, Shicoff compares singers to professional athletes. He asks his students to consider how many times they supposed Tiger Woods has practiced his golf swing or how many times Roger Federer has drilled his tennis serve. "You can't make a change and expect that the next day it's there [just] because you made it two or three times in 40 minutes," he says.

All this instruction is, once again, in the interest of empowering singers to know their own voices and forge the best paths forward. In so doing, they will be more independent in their techniques as they get older. "I kind of think you have to reach 30 before you really have an idea what you're doing, that it's not just natural talent or from a teacher that has just spoon-fed you," he says. "Once you go on the road, your teacher's not going in your suitcase and you have to have an idea of what you're doing."

But it is not only the students who must listen. Shicoff believes the skill is also of paramount importance for teachers as they listen to singers to quickly determine how to address technical inefficiencies.

In this regard, he feels some teachers in academia are limited if they do not have extensive experience listening to high-level voices to notice how they sound in differently sized rooms and theaters. "If you come into [teaching] rather early, you're not used to what carries acoustically in a theater and you gear to the rooms that you've been taught in—and in universities, some of the rooms are big and some are not."

He acknowledges there are many successful approaches to teaching and he values the knowledge and skills that can be gained during graduate study in academic institutions. Still, he also believes that the experience of maintaining a career in singing informs teaching in a way that academia cannot replicate. "We're in the age of bachelor's–master's–doctorate, and a doctorate is becoming much more important now. I'm not against it. All of that is super important. No argument. But it's coming at the expense of experience, and the ears are not as trained," he says. "I think academia has to have better ears. I'm not criticizing any specific schools. I just have to say that the ears are very, very important."

Business Decisions

Of course, building technique is only one element to address for those seeking a career in opera. Singers must also navigate the financial sustainability of their paths and prospects for success. In this regard, Shicoff knows that today's singers face challenges that are different than those he faced when he was launching his own singing career. Since a number of opera companies have closed their doors over the years, fewer domestic performance opportunities exist for singers living in the United States. "I think you have to go to Europe," Shicoff says. "I think that there are more opportunities. I watch the good singers—the really good singers—in the programs [where I teach], and they all go off to Europe. Or they get into the Met, which is a whole other story."

He believes that the best Young Artist Programs are providing training on the financial aspect of the business, like how to work with agents, how to negotiate contracts, and how to plan for the future. As Shicoff points out, once an agent has been paid and food and lodging have been

accounted for, "You're lucky if you walk away with 60 percent of your gross. If you don't invest that on some level . . . you can wind up at the end of a career with not as much flexibility to make decisions. It's about having options, and those options are limited if you're worried about money."

Managing a career has its political side, too. Once again, Shicoff can speak from experience. Having cancelled many performances over the years, he earned a reputation as a "bad boy" with some companies. Therefore, he emphasizes the need to be a good colleague and to use care when handling business conflicts, whether with an agent, an administration, or a conductor. "I'm really the person who says, 'Be careful of the politics of this situation because it will come back to bite you in your butt,'" he admits. "I've done it. I can tell you from first-hand experience—it's painful when it comes back."

When students feel wronged or put upon by someone in the business, Shicoff offers a listening ear while exploring ways to resolve the situation. "There are ways to handle this," he says. "You [can] voice your opinion to me and you can just spew all you want about this particular situation. But not to the person. There are ways to handle it."

Next Act

As the focus of his career shifts away from the stage and into the studio, Shicoff remains integral and active in the field that has compelled and fascinated him for so long. "You know what? It's a life force of its own, singing," he says. "It's a gift for me, really—whatever that gift, whatever level you're at."

His continued work is giving voice to a new cadre of singers, many of whom would be happy to realize even a fraction of the onstage success he was able to enjoy for more than 40 years. "I always think I was lucky. It was a gift to have the career I had," he says. "I think that about my singing and I think that about my teaching."

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