

Document Citation

Title	Modus operandi
Author(s)	J. Hoberman J. Hoberman
Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1985 Jul 30
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	56
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Il bacio di Tosca (Tosca's kiss), Schmid, Daniel, 1984

FILM

Modus Operandi

By J. Hoberman

TOSCA'S KISS. Directed by Daniel Schmid. Produced by Hans-Ulrich Jordi and Marcel Hoehn. Released by Italtoons. At the Film Forum, through August 6.

Some documentaries are made to educate, others exist to bear witness. The most precious, however, are those that defamiliarize their subjects—films that literally put things in a new light. *Handicapped Love*, a 1980 Swiss documentary on the sex lives of spastics, amputees, and paraplegics, was one of these; so is *Tosca's Kiss*, the latest movie by the Swiss director Daniel Schmid. Documenting Casa Verdi, the now shabby Milanese palace that serves as a retirement home for elderly opera stars, Schmid has made a film about old age and dying which is neither sentimental nor grotesque but cumulatively startling.

Tosca's Kiss scarcely avoids the pathos of old people's stolid, tranced-out reveries or their comic confusion of life and art ("that's the slave chorus, poor things—to think that such things exist today"). Indeed, it thrives upon such scenes as an elderly diva tentatively singing along with an aria she recorded perhaps half a century before, or the jealous backbiting of superstars Callas and Caruso. But the film comes truly into its own when a roomful of crones suddenly breaks into a lilting aria from *Traviata*. At these moments, *Tosca's Kiss* could stagger Descartes with its visceral duality of body and soul. The huge, incredibly youthful voices that come soaring out of these frail beings is awesome in a completely different way from, say, Don Ameche's breakdance in *Cocoon*.

Founded in 1902 by Giuseppe Verdi, Casa Verdi was originally supported by the composer's royalties. That Verdi's works went into the public domain 20 years ago has made the place that much more vulnerable: Verdi is the retired singers' god and God is dead. Although *Tosca's Kiss* is an affectionate tribute, it also camps on the form it celebrates with the ruthlessness of the Marx Brothers' *Night at the Opera* or Syberberg's *Parsifal*. ("Every shot in the film is an act of terrorism and pornography," Schmid has written, somewhat hyperbolically.) On one hand, *Tosca's Kiss* offers a corrective to opera's surplus of beauty and emotion. On the other, it's like a sublime form of commedia dell'arte—even an ironic metaphor for Europe (and European culture) as well.

This funny, moving film is a voluptuous memento mori. There are virtually no youthful pictures to remind us of the singers' past glories. Their stardom must be taken here on its own terms, as when the dazzlingly gracious 80-year-old Sara Scuderi demonstrates the essence of diva-ness. This too is not without its comic aspect. "I was impressed by the fact that each one was on his own 'wavelength,'" Schmid has written of Casa Verdi's citizens. "Friendships hardly exist. . . . Competition is rife. . . . One wants to speak to so-and-so, the others claim he is dead. Then the door opens and in walks the supposedly dead man. In this respect, they are utterly shameless."

Shameless or possessed? "You'll find me singing two hours after my death," an aged diva tells the camera. One of the great things about Casa Verdi, and thus

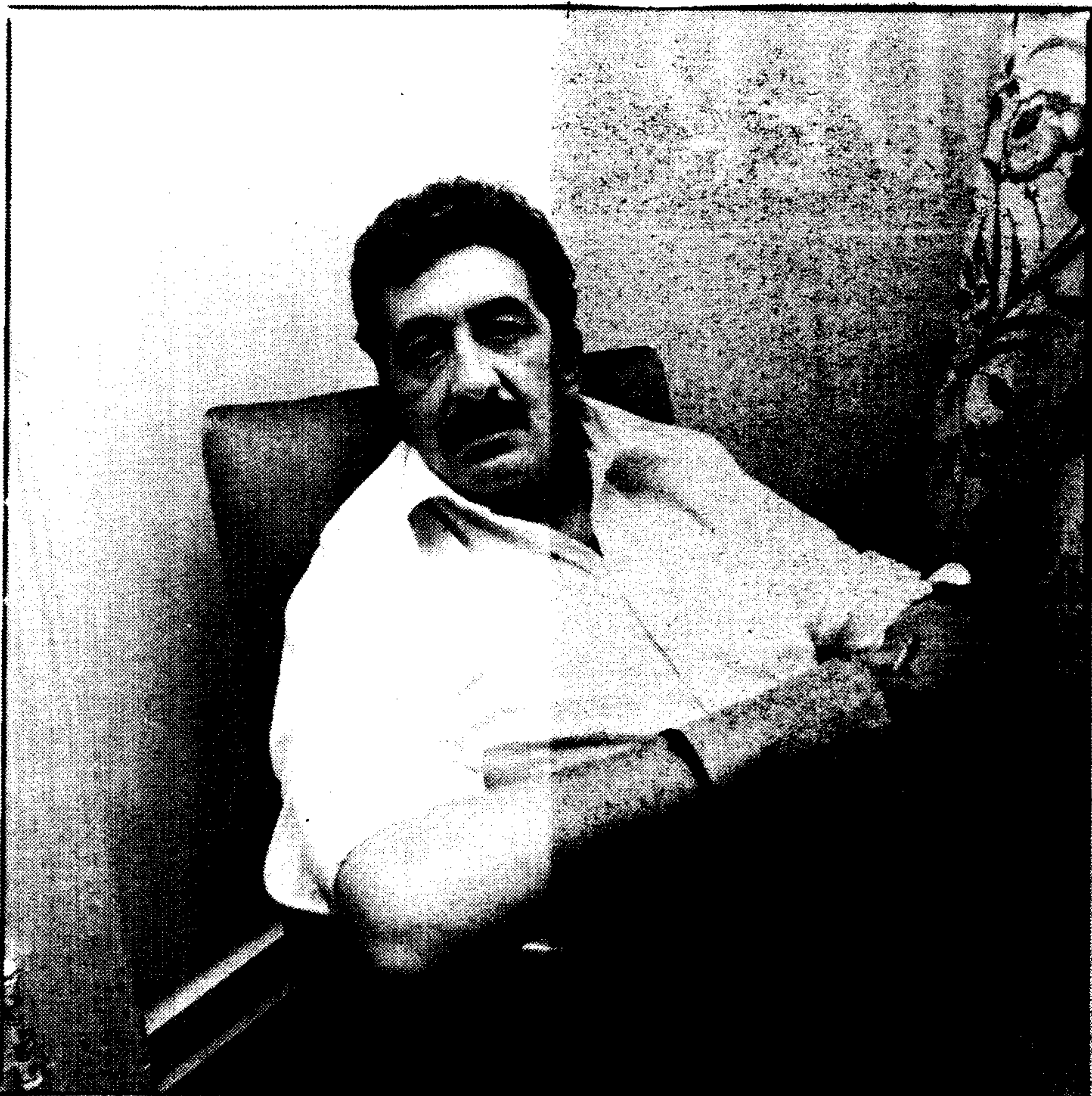


In Tosca's Kiss, the dazzlingly gracious 80-year-old Sara Scuderi demonstrates the essence of diva-ness.

Tosca's Kiss, is that its elderly inhabitants are also major league hams—they know how to play to the camera or snub it. One guy brings the crew down into the basement so that he can dress up in his Rigoletto costume; La Scuderi induces another octogenarian to help her play the climactic scene from *Tosca* out in a corridor, with music dubbed under their a cappella singing and nurses walking in and out of the frame.

This audacious scene is perhaps the key moment in the film. "Die, you wretch. That is Tosca's kiss," trills Scuderi, making Schmid's title explicit as she pretends to stab her accomplice. "Can I get up?" he plaintively asks after a while. "Just a minute," she replies, enjoying her

moment on the stage, at the center of attention, for as long as possible. Ending with ghostly applause and phantom curtain calls, *Tosca's Kiss* gives new meaning to the cliché accolade "the performance of one's life."



Director Schmid: "Every shot is an act of terrorism and pornography."

ROBIN HOLLAND