

Racette (left)
and Clayton
at their 2005
wedding



Two real-life divas—and life partners— take stage at Lincoln Center in New York City this month.

ments in our one-bedroom Manhattan apartment,” says Clayton.

Though neither performer was ever closeted personally or professionally, coming out in print was a coming out of a different sort. Racette was slated for a cover story interview for the June 2002 issue of *Opera News* when at the last minute, writer Eric Myers asked if she wanted to go public about her relationship with Clayton. “We had talked about it for some time,” says Racette, “and decided it was time to do it.” Both agree that every lesbian must do her part to break down barriers and challenge homophobia wherever it exists. While opera has always attracted gay performers and fans, the local folks at regional performance spaces perhaps did not know about the Racette-Clayton coupling until after the media attention regarding their sexuality exploded. But both report little repercussion from that article. Says Racette: “We heard that the publication received a few negative letters, but by and large our experience since has been very positive.”

Clayton points out, “When you tell an American you are an opera singer, their response is ‘Wow’ and they already have a positive image of us. A few minutes later it comes out in conversation that we are lesbians, it doesn’t matter because we’ve just made an initial positive impact. Although we hate that we have to do it in that particular fashion, it is one way of using our public

on the plaza

By Stephanie Schroeder

It’s the stuff of lyrics and librettos, the story of how two American opera stars, soprano Patricia Racette and mezzo-soprano Beth Clayton, met. It goes like this: In 1997, both were at the Santa Fe Opera rehearsing *La Traviata*. Their worlds collided and their romance and courtship were as hot as the mid summer New Mexico sun. As Racette has famously been quoted, “It was the first time Violetta ever went home with Flora.”

Cut to October 2007: The couple has been together 10 years, was married at their home in Santa Fe in 2005 and is happier now and more successful than ever in their own careers. Speaking from the Tanglewood Music Festival in Massachusetts, where Racette was rehearsing for *Don Carlo* and Clayton had just flown in from a production of *Orlando* in Munich to be by her partner’s side, they both took time to speak with CURVE about the uncanny occurrence of both women performing at Lincoln Center this month.

Clayton, 38, will lead the production of *Carmen* at the New York City Opera (Oct. 5–Nov. 17: nycopera.com) while Racette, 42, will headline in *Madama Butterfly* (Oct. 8–27: metoperafamily.org). “It’s total girl power on Lincoln Square. A real first—two partners singing on the Plaza at the same time,” exclaims Racette’s manager Caroline Woodfield. It’s a rare coincidence indeed and one that involves each singer’s core repertoire. “It’s basically the meat and potatoes of both our careers, and we both die at the end of the night,” laughs Racette.

The last and only time Clayton and Racette were together at Lincoln Plaza was in 2005 singing “Flower Duet” at the True Colors gay pride party hosted by famous writer, actor and drag queen Charles Busch. This time will be quite different. They will be engaged in exhausting runs of two of the best known operas in the world that will challenge them both professionally and personally. “We have several days where we have back-to-back performances. It will be very interesting logistically to work out sleeping and resting arrange-

personas in a very useful manner for our community. Especially in a time of the escalating Right, our sensitivity is heightened and our lesbian perspective allows our minds to be more open, meaning we’re more inclusive in our thinking because we still live what is considered an ‘alternative lifestyle.’” Adds Racette, “Especially under the current administration where we have no legal rights or recognition for our marriage, no validation for our relationship, it’s important to us to use whatever public power we possess in a way that benefits our community.”

Laughing together, the couple encourages and supports each other’s statements. When asked to describe their personal style, Racette claims “visceral” while Clayton lovingly scolds that she herself just used the same word to describe performing live before an audience. “I’d say Pat is intense,” says Clayton while Racette is quick to chime in that “Beth’s elegance is her signature.” Both concur that opera is “demanding both emotionally and physically and requires much inner strength and resolve.”

“Although many operas were written hundreds of years ago, they are the stuff of poetry, literature and music, with everyday themes of love, lust, greed and hatred that are timeless. However, continues Racette, “society’s ideals of women have since changed.” For example, as an actor she portrays Cio-Cio-San as a strong woman who goes against the mores of her day rather than as the weak, subservient stereotype of Asian women that some choose to believe *Butterfly* represents.

At their home in Santa Fe, N.M. where, Clayton is quick to point out, there are the most lesbians per capita in the U.S.; the couple happily “hibernates” between performances, some of which are booked through 2012. They relax together with apricot toy poodle Sappho who, both agree is “the biggest lady in the house, a total diva with a huge personality,” Clayton says. “After all, she’s been around for 8-1/2 years.” ■