

Operation Capablanca, Music-dramatic Moves with 2⁶⁴ Open Outcomes

Lucas Gehrmann

From the vantage point of our raised umpire seats, Lothar Schmid and I survey the chessboard and announce our moves. I am José Raoul Capablanca, he is Hermann Steiner and the game was delivered in Los Angeles 1933. Capablanca shot diagonally across board with his queen until check. Lothar Schmid selected this game together with Zenita and provided the commentary; the moves and their commentary constitute the libretto of her chess opera "Operation Capablanca". Grand Master Schmid was nominated *Chess Umpire of the century* in the year of its world premiere; among other things, he so diplomatically steered the World Championships between Spasski and Fischer, in 1972 that the tournament was discontinued by neither of the two adversaries, although after the second game it certainly looked like this might happen. Capablanca was said to have checkmated his father at the age of four years, whereas my father was obliged to offer me a remis at the age of nine years just so I didn't resign altogether. I sit up here, as exhibition curator, as someone who understands next to nothing about chess. However, for Zenita the highly unequal casting of her announcer heroes in the background does not play a role since I can at least read. Thus, I am happy to be able to sit up here, though just a little worried about making a slip since learning by heart was never exactly my forte and the reading light is not so strong and is directed at the large board below us on which, next to thirtytwo chess pieces designed by Zenita, the great singer Maria Harpner as Queen and the great actor Ignaz Kirchner as Black King are acting or rather put in motion by Zenita's charming sister and my colleague Gesualdo from the Kunsthalle. I suspect that all of us are probably somewhat worried since, most likely, neither of us have ever before done or experienced anything comparable. I think back to the two rehearsals during which this performance actually originated. The music had of course been composed, the play already existed as text, the stage set – the chessboard with thirtytwo pieces – also existed, the actors, actresses and Zenita were there. But who, exactly, was to do what when and how nobody really knew. For a while we were all somewhat perplexed. How is it supposed to succeed after only two rehearsals? Little did we know that Zenita had no need for previously scripted director's instructions and that, aside from the highest possible materials, technical experience and a few ideas of their own, the artists did not require pre-formulated instruction sheets in order to carry out their work: And even less so when not only materials but also individuals participate in the creation of the work! Our initial bafflement about what was evidently missing gave way to amazement about the advantages that this apparent loss would then bring. Consequently, neither of us were marionettes but rather autonomous actors who, although having been prescribed a framework within which to work, were free to choose our own personal form of expression and interaction. This evolved into cooperation with Zenita who functioned not as a director issuing instructions but rather as a mediator between us and her own vision. In this way, Zenita initiated a process that went further, enabling this chess opera to be developed with each performance as if for the first time and in a new variation; since, even during the performance in which it's inventor was observing and listening from the outside as-it-were, several things were done differently than during the previous day's "dress rehearsal", and if I perceived some agitation in the air, this had nothing to do with the worry about the success of the show but rather the desire for spontaneity, which the actors increasingly began to enjoy.

Hence, “Operation Capablanca” manifestly proved itself to be a Zenita City “production”. In Zenita City is a generous forum in which, together with the founder and name giver of this City, people from the most diverse forms of art, games, theoretical and applied subjects assemble with the aim of realising projects. What attracts these diverse personalities to the City is not the prospect of money or fame, which some agencies would try in vain to realise, but a new, lively and not previously calculable form of synergetic development and realisation of ideas, personal professions and passions.

The Black King is no longer able to find a free field. His head is inclined in a bow towards his victor. Calm, light out, applause: Zenita is brought on to the stage, she is showered by flowers. An operation is happily concluded and may many many others follow!