

# Read My Lips, or Simply Refer to the Subtitles

*by* Con Chapman

A friend of mine—a composer—has been shopping an opera around for some time without success. I can't understand why nobody's buying; it's based on the life of Arthur Inman, a creepy hypochondriac who spent most of his life in a darkened room in Boston's Back Bay and hired people to come talk to him. He recorded these conversations in a *155 volume* diary, and had sex with some of his working-class female interlocutors. If that heartwarming story doesn't scream "Broadway Bound!" I don't know what does.

I was commiserating with my friend last weekend when he told me that he had enhanced the DVD that he sends to potential producers. "I added subtitles," he said.

"In what language?" I asked.

"English."

"But," I asked, a bit confused, "isn't the opera in English?"

Well, yes, he said, but having subtitles makes it easier to understand. So much of operatic singing is vocal virtuosity that distorts the sense of what is being said.



*"We just stepped on each other's TO-OOES!"*

To say that I had a "Eureka" moment—a lightbulb over the head epiphany—would not be an exaggeration. "So there are people who will add English subtitles to ordinary, everyday English?" I asked.

"For a price," he replied, a bit ruefully. "It's not cheap."

"Gimme a ballpark."

"More than a teeth-cleaning, less than a car. Depends on how long your libretto is."

"I don't speak Italian, but let's keep my private parts out of this."

"I mean the text, the words . . ."

"Oh, right."



*Calvin Coolidge: "You lose."*

In my life and work I try to follow the taciturn example of Calvin Coolidge, who famously replied "You lose" to a reporter who told the President he had bet his editor he could get "Silent Cal" to say three words. If I could keep a firm grip on the faucet from which flowed the life-giving waters of conversation, perhaps I could afford a subtitleist for my family.



*Not that kind of Titleist.*

"Give me the guy's number," I said with barely-repressed excitement as I recalled the many misunderstandings I've had with my wife over the years due to saying the wrong thing, or the right thing under the wrong circumstances. "This will be the best money I've ever spent."



*"Why did he say I have nicer in-laws than him?"*

I rang the guy up and he reviewed his various payment options: *a la carte* one-off subtitles for especially tense events such as extended family get-togethers; weekly and monthly retainers during particularly stressful periods such as the November to December holidays; or an annual "Platinum Club" for the most creditworthy customers.

"I'll take the *a la carte* plan. I've got my wife's birthday next week, then the in-laws visit," I said.

"Okay," he said, "but I wouldn't skimp if I were you."

"What do you mean?"

"It's the misunderstandings *before* the in-laws arrive that are usually the problem."

I considered that assertion for a moment, and ended by agreeing with him. "You're right," I said. "It's the eye-rolling, the exasperated sighs that I can't hold in when my wife tells me that I have to get dressed up to have dinner in my own home. *That's* what gets me in trouble."

"You got it pal. So you want to go with a month's worth?"

"That oughta do it."



*"I can't believe you called my mother a gerontomatriarch. She is not a dinosaur!"*

He showed up the next night for dinner, and I sat him down at the end of the table.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?" my wife asked.

"He's not a friend, really, he's Lowell Buntrock, a sub-titleist."

"What's that?"

"He's going to translate into English what we say to each other from now until your folks leave."

"But we already talk in English," my son said. Easy for him to say. He just grunts.



"We do and we don't," I said as I cocked my head knowingly, which I do whenever I'm about to dispense a little mature advice for my son to ignore. "We talk—but do we really communicate?"

"That means he thinks you're lying about that empty bottle of Smirnoff's Green Apple vodka he found in the driveway," Buntrock said.



"See—he's already helping out!" I said to my wife with satisfaction.

"I suppose that's better than trying to drag a little conversation out of you after a day at the office," she said.

"That means she wants to talk about curtains," Buntrock translated.

"I thought as much!" I said as I glanced from him to her. "What's the point of even opening my mouth with you?"

"To give her a chance to catch her breath," Buntrock interjected. This guy was a real pro.

"I'm not sure I like this idea," my wife said as she looked askance at Buntrock.

"That means she doesn't like your idea," the sub-titleist said.



*Father really doesn't know best.*

"You know, there's something to be said for subtlety, and shading the truth just a bit," my wife said. "I think it would be hard to live with brutal honesty 365 days a year."

"That means she bought another throw pillow she doesn't want to tell you about," Buntrock said. "And it's 366 in a leap year."

You could have cut the tension with one of those dull but fancy cheese knives women buy each other when they run out of gift ideas.

"Could you, uh, turn it down maybe a notch?" I asked Buntrock.

"It's your money, pal," he said with a resigned shake of his head, "but that's like asking a kick return specialist to go at half speed."

I looked at my wife, who looked back with a cold expression on her face. "Maybe we'll . . . uh . . . just write this off to experience, okay?" I said to Buntrock.

"You forfeit the balance," he said as he got up to go.

"That's okay," I said, hoping to worm my back into my wife's affections. "I really do enjoy getting together with my in-laws."

"That means he . . . " Buntrock began, but I cut him off.



"That means that, like Alice Roosevelt Longworth, my motto is 'If you can't say anything nice, come sit by me.'"

*Available in Kindle format on amazon.com as part of the collection "Boston Baroques."*

