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LA FENICE:

The Venice Opera House & Hotel

(3,000 words)

Alan Jolis
16, rue Emile Duclaux
75015 Paris
Tel: (33-1) 4449-0890
Fax: (33-1) 4219-9606

At 9 p.m. on Sunday January 29, 1995, the manager of the Hotel La Fenice et des Artistes, the Austrian born Dante Apollonio, now 75, notices that a fire has started next door inside the most beautiful opera house in the world. No smoke yet, but some flames can be seen shooting out from under the front door.

He's a lifelong bachelor, but you could say he is married to the hotel, staying late, coming early. For over thirty years this has been his home, his pride, his baby. Now Dante's hands shake as he dials the fire department.

The fire is not considered major, but at 9.05 p.m. Dante goes and stands outside the hotel. The wind is everything. Dante is tall, 1.84 meters with a handsome regal profile, an aquiline nose and a dark full head of hair. Marcello Mastroianni when he stays in the hotel calls him "my brother," other guests think he's a nobleman because he looks so imposing. Dante is usually charming with guests, but tonight he has lost the desire to make jokes and small talk.

Outside the hotel entrance, Paulo Saccoman, 57, the night concierge of more than thirty years, who is on duty that night, joins Dante. Paul telephones his wife, Maria Saccoman the chief hotel governess to say he will be late. He doesn't tell her because he knows how upset and worried this will make her.

9.20 p.m. The first firemen arrive. In spite of all its many canals and its lagoon, Venice is extremely vulnerable to fire. The houses are so old and so close together that if the wind is blowing in the wrong direction, just a spark could destroy an entire historical and priceless neighborhood. And to make matters worse, the closest canal, the one that passes just behind the hotel, Calle della Verona, is empty and being dredged for its mud and debris (which explains the vague smell of sewage that permeates the night). The firemen waste precious minutes hooking up water lines to

water from farther away. Dante, who has a poet's soul mutters, "Water water everywhere, and not a drop to pump."

9.24 p.m. Dante calls his boss, Michele Facchini, 41, who is off skiing in Cortina d'Ampezzo. The family has owned the Fenice Hotel sine 1962, it is like a member of the family, their pride and joy. Dante tells him some of the workmen inside the opera house may have been careless and left a blow torch or a bunson burner lit after they left for the day. La Fenice for which Verdi wrote Rigoletto and La Traviatta, where Pavarotti has sung countless times, is under renovation for Woody Allen's next clarinet concert in Europe.

9.28 p.m. Fire fighters enter the opera, disappear in smoke and relay each other every five minutes. Some come to rest on the steps of the hotel prostrated with smoke inhalation, or exhaustion. Their faces are black with soot and grime. Facchini, his nerves feel like barbed wire, calls back for news.

Venice has been plagued by fire over the years, and its fire department is now one of the most highly-trained and best-equipped in Italy. Every fire station in Venice has been alerted. Two brand new helicopters are dispatched to bring water from nearby rivers. (Water from the lagoon is salty and was not used to fight the fire).

In 1773, a fire destroyed the San Benedeto Opera house, and Venice built the Phoenix theater (named after the mythical bird who rise from the ashes) a new opera house, inaugurated on May 16, 1792. On the night of December 12 to 13, 1836, the Phoenix completely burned down, but was rebuilt in an amazing seven months.

9.35 p.m. Dante and Paulo notice the flames inside the opera growing tall. Black smoke begins to pour out of the windows. The 110-year-old wood inside is burning like kindling. To get close to the fire, the firemen enter the hotel, the left wing or oldest

wing and from there they aim their fire hoses directly into the opera.

9.40 Maria Saccoman, 62, who has smelled the fire has rushed from her house nearby, and she pours glasses of cold water for the firefighters.

At 9.45 p.m., the police begin putting up barriers to keep the curious and neighbors away. The wind is blowing away from the hotel, towards the open square on the other side, but its direction can change at any moment.

Dante describes it all in a paralyzed monotone to Facchini. Most of the guests are on their portable cell phones narrating what they are seeing. It's as if the spectacle were so grotesque, so larger than life they need to describe it to outsiders.

It's a cold night in Venice, but close to the fire it is hot. The whole sky is slowly turning red. Dante looks over at his trusty night porter. Paulo, white-haired and with wire-rimmed glasses must be the most dignified concierge in the world, and he too started working here with Dante back in 1962. Paulo exudes discretion and propriety. An expert on old books, etchings and rare maps, his advice is often sought by collectors and courts. Paulo removes his glasses to wipe away the tears.

9.50 p.m. The first helicopter arrives and begins dropping its cargo load of water directly on the opera house. The ballet of the two helicopters coming and going will continue all night, stopping only to refuel and scoop up more river water.

Nothing seems to help. By 10 p.m., the fire is raging out of control and the fire fighters start hosing down the windows and shutters of the hotel next door to prevent the intense heat from setting fire to neighboring houses. The Fenice's distinctive wood work, gold lame paneling and 800 chairs padded with red velvet are burning at an exceedingly fast rate.

10.30 p.m. "The roof and the walls of the opera have not collapsed, but the

firemen are having a difficult time," Dante tells Facchini on the phone: "Chemicals were stored inside to help with the renovation, the intense heat is difficult to battle."

La Fenice has been the home to such legends as Stravinsky, Prokoviev, Benjamin Britten, Leonard Bernstein, Nureev, Pina Bausch, Bejart, Henry Caruso, Marilyn Horne, Renatta Scotto, Pavarotti and Jose Carrera. But more than a list of names, it is an institution. "It is not a jewel, it is a bonbon, it has acoustics that no amount of money can ever replace," says Paulo, "Even if they rebuild it, it will never have the same brilliant acoustics."

At 11 p.m. all Italian television stations interrupt their national programs to announce the fire. There is no film footage yet, but a profound consternation and sense of tragedy grips the nation.

11.10 p.m. the mayor of Venice, Massimo Cacciari, 45, arrives on the scene. A Communist and a professor of philosophy, he vows on TV that all possible means are being used to save the opera house and to find out what caused the fire.

11.30 p.m. Michele Facchini, off in his ski chalet, keeps surfing the TV channels watching the first film footage of the fire. The whole night sky above Venice is a tortured howling red. No question of sleeping tonight. Facchini packs his bag and prepares to leave his family and drive down to Venice.

Midnight. Standing outside the modern automatic glass doors of his hotel, Dante has a front row seat to what could be the Fenice's last performance. He keeps wiping his eyes with his pocket handkerchief. He is emotionally drained and physically exhausted. Huge clouds of smoke roll across the lagoon. The howl of the fire is so loud it masks the sounds of the helicopters. They come and go dropping their cargo of water, but it is like dropping a thimble-full of water into an oven. Wood cinders fall as

far as a mile away. The wind, thank God, is still blowing away.

It's the dead season, two weeks before the winter carnival, so the hotel is fairly empty. Only thirteen rooms are occupied out of a total of seventy, but a list of the hotel's most famous guests reads like a who's who of the century's top artists, including: Von Karajan, Arthur Rubinstein, Rostropovitch, Duke Ellington, Sarah Vaughan, Charles Aznavour, Visconti, Miles Davis and Robert Mapplethorpe.

Many like Fellini, Jose Carrera and Yevgeni Yevtuchenko turn down offers of free accommodations at the five-star Danieli Hotel, in favor of the three-star Fenice because this is their home away from home, their haunt since early bohemian days. When Fellini stayed here, he said, "It always brings me luck. This name is the sign of the resurrection, the sign of a new film!"

The old-world, slightly decadent charms of the Fenice hotel with its pink silk on the walls are rediscovered by new celebrities, most recently, Robert DeNiro, Paloma Picasso, and while starring in Woody Allen's new film, Julia Roberts.

1 a.m. Late night tourists on distant vaporettos or arriving at Marco Polo airport can smell the fire in the air. Dante cannot smell it because the smell has gotten so deep into his hair and the pores of his skin that even after washing and changing his clothes, it will remain there for days.

1.30 a.m. The fire seems to be at last under control -- the walls are still standing and so is the roof -- but neither Dante, Paulo, or his wife Maria can tear them-selves away from the spectacle.

2 a.m. Dante calls Facchini: "There are no more flames anywhere. The firemen are leaving. We're lucky, it could have been much worse. They have to wait until daylight to see what can be salvaged."

2.05 a.m. Dante steps back into the hotel, and at that moment a wrenching roar fills the night. He turns. Dust is rising, beams are falling.

The roof and two of the inside walls have caved in. The fire starts up almost immediately consuming the roof beams. This time it is the end. Immolation.

5 a.m. Facchini gets in his Mitsubishi and drives down to Venice. He has an 8 a.m. meeting with his lawyers, with the insurance rep, and with the commission the mayor has named to look into the causes of the fire.

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For over a century, the fate of the Fenice opera house has been inexorably linked to that of the hotel next door. So when on February 10, 1996 the mayor of Venice pledged that the theater would be rebuilt in its original 18th century style, the Fenice Hotel received a new lease on life.

The hotel's beginning were less grandiloquent than the opera's: In 1895, A. Romanelli bought a run-down tavern called, Siora Roma, and changed its name to the Osteria all'Isola di Murano. That same year, his daughter, Elisa, married Enrico Zoppi, a sailor from nearby Ancona. Zoppi took over cooking duties and in 1907 became the boss of the restaurant, building up what he called a "euphoric ambiance" and advertised, *"Buona sera, buona cucina, buoni prezzi* (good evening, good kitchen, good prices).

In 1910, Zoppi changed the name to the Trattoria la Fenice, and his clientele became steadily more refined. In the 1920s, he attracted such famous *gourmets as* Puccini, Serge Lifar, Franz Lehar and Gabriele d'Annunzio. Mussolini so loved the Fenice's *Fegato alla Venetiana* that he would send his private plane to pick some up. When the Queen of England dined here, she asked "for something I have never tried

before." Zoppi brought her his specialty *Pasta e Fagioli* (pasta and red beans), saying, "It's a peasant dish, so I am certain she has never tried anything like it."

To serve clients who worked seasonally at the opera, Zoppi fixed up and rented out a few rooms above his restaurant. At first twelve, then twenty, then twenty-five.

"The restaurant and the hotel above it gained a reputation as an artist hangout," recalls Facchini's father, Anacleto, a charming refined ship-builder, art collector and amateur historian who at 81 has lost none of his *joie de vivre*. "In 1925, it hosted a chamber music festival. The playwright, Pirandello lived here for the entire 1926 theater season 1926. Captains of finance and industrialists, even Mussolini's finance minister, Cinni, frequented the hotel. It was Europe's 'in' place during the 1930s, Zoppi's heyday.

The end came swiftly. With the war, the influx of tourists stopped and in 1940, Zoppi died leaving the property to his two sons, the hotel to Bruno and the restaurant to Dino. The sibling rivalry was deep-seated and quite destructive. Dino continued the restaurant with success; his wife doing the cooking, and he serving as Maitre d'.

"But the hotel fell on hard times," recalls Anacleto Facchini. "Bruno had dangerous relations, unscrupulous friends involved in drugs. He was a spendthrift and when he went bankrupt in 1962, the hotel was put up for sale at a judicial auction."

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Anacleto, born on May 24, 1915, the day Italy declared war, was given the middle name of Guerilio ("little warrior"). He was born in Motta, a village near Modena. Almost everyone in the family was either a doctor or a priest, but his father was a pharmacist and owned land.

With his charm and dash, Anacleto worked in Trieste for the purchasing and

contracting offices of the American occupying forces, and later he pioneered barter deals behind the Iron Curtain, especially in nearby Yugoslavia and East Germany. But he loved ships and started a career as a shipping agent and shipbuilder, which made him travel a great deal. Soon he was rubbing shoulders with Greek shipowning tycoons like Stavros, Livanos, Costas, Onassis and Michel Lemos.

"The reason we bought the hotel in 1962," says his wife, Maria-Teresa, "is that I was tired of his long absences. I wanted to find work that we might do together so we could enjoy more of a family life."

But buying the Fenice did not put an end to Anacleto's shipbuilding or traveling. He was almost never there, but he did three things that were strokes of genius: He hired Dante Apollonio away from the Savoia Hotel in Trieste and installed him as the Fenice's General Manager. He contributed to the hotel some of the best paintings of his modern art collection -- his favorites being the Austrian Hundertwasser, the Frenchman Bro and the Italian Renzulli. Finally, he had the good sense to leave his wife in overall charge.

For the next thirty years, the saintly and respected Maria-Teresa ran the hotel with an iron fist and a heart of gold. She personally decorated every room in traditional Venetian style. Each is different and each has a sample of her genius: Pink silk coverings on the walls, large mirrored bathrooms, dark curtains, thick rugs.

The outside is an 18th century palazzo, the inside decor is fin-de-siecle Isadora Duncan retro with plush comfortable couches and overtuffed pillows of dark-red and ochre. It is a Venetian in look, but has a decidedly home-grown look.

Then a most unexpected threat loomed: In 1972, an engineer built a new hotel immediately adjoining the Fenice Hotel, of equivalent size and style, and informed the

Facchinis he was going to open in direct competition with them.

"I took him out to lunch and proposed a truce and a deal," recalls Anacleto. "The deal was that each would offer, in a sealed envelope, a price for the other's hotel. The one with the higher price would buy, and the other would sell. It was unusual and highly dramatic. When I sat down I did not know if I had just sold Maria-Theresa's heart throb -- she would have killed me of course, so I did not dare tell her." But when he got up from table, Anacleto had just doubled the capacity of the hotel, acquiring what is now alled "the new wing" of the hotel.

There is nothing "hip" or "modern" about either wing of La Fenice. If you want the flashy, the glitzy, the fast nightlife, this is not your place. Even though you may rub shoulders with Ornella Muti or Dame Joan Sutherland at the bar, this is a family hotel. The service is slow, and the cleaning gets done when it needs to, not a minute sooner. The Fenice has never had to run after customers.

The personnel is extremely protective of its guests' privacy. Film actors come and disappear with their exotic lovers, often in the rooftop suite *"la mansarde"* (room 364), and are not seen until they leave. During his recent split-up with his wife, Pavarotti sought refuge there for a month with his secretary, "la Nicoletta." Although Nicoletta went out shopping for scampi, fish and kilos of pasta every day, no word of her presence got out before Luciano's irate wife went to the press.

After years of petitioning the city's planning commission, the hotel has finally gotten permission to put an elevator in the old wing, which will make it as accessible as the new wing. But otherwise the Facchinis have no plan to change a winning combination. It is this noblesse oblige that keeps the world's aesthetes and leading artists returning. This is home away from home. Their home in Venice.

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The Facchini's daughter Luana, now married and living in Trieste, never showed any interest in the hotel. But their son Michele loves it. As a boy he spent all his free time running around the kitchen and up and down the staircases. Maria and Paulo Saccoman recall Michele running about in short pants, always causing trouble. The hotel was really one big happy family. When Marcello Mastroianni would kiss Dante on the cheek and call him my brother you felt it was a family.

So what was more natural than for the owner's son to be forever loose in the back staircase. Maria Saccoman recalls today: "Michele was always down in the laundry room, where it was warm and where our large Pasqua ("Easter") -- we called her that because she was shaped like an Easter egg --gave him candy."

Today of course, all laundry is sent out to professional cleaners, but Michele recalls, "She was fat, she was beautiful, and she ironed sheets like a saint for hours on end. That was my domain. I was king. It was warm and full of goodies to eat."

In his twenties, Michele Facchini trained in hotel administration in Lausanne, and then in Brazil. He returned in 1985 at the age of thirty and slowly took over responsibility for the day-to-day operations of the hotel.

"I've never had any title here," he explains. "Even today at forty-one I am still not the boss. The real boss is Mama. If I touch any room, any single piece of furniture, any of her decoration, and she does not approve, I have hell to pay for it."

The management style of Michele is far different than that of his mother. And as unorthodox as it is, it is no less successful than hers. The secret of his success is that he is seconded by employees who have loved him since birth.

Dante, the General Manager, Paulo the Porter, his wife Maria, or Giuseppe, the

long-haired bartender with a pigtail, all respect Michele, but they still think of their 1.90 meter-tall and 90 kilo boss as a ten-year-old running around in short pants.

Michele is shy. He can sit in the hotel living room, behind his dark sunglasses, so quietly guests don't even notice him. He can go through entire meetings without saying a word. When employees look to him for orders he often stares blankly back at them and waits for them to suggest an answer. His decisions may not always be brilliant, but he is a master in the art of listening.

"He is a Chinese riddle," says Dante laughing, "Michele takes everything like a ruminant, chewing over what he hears, never divulging what he really thinks. You have to ask him two or three times the same question to get his opinion. But we don't mind his opaqueness, we have learned to navigate with his subtlety."

Michele is not flashy like his father, not a dominant presence like his mother, yet he runs the Fenice with finesse and a sure hand. His silence and his shyness force the employees to come up with good decisions for him. When he nods to their suggestions or shakes his head, you know this is a perfectly smooth system. No one could have intentionally designed or invented a more baroque management style, yet according to most impartial critics, it works beautifully.

"Our policy is that we are an *hotel de charme*," explains Michele, "where one gets personal attention. We have extended this to our other hotels in Amsterdam, Verona, Trieste and maybe soon Paris. We want our guests to feel that the concierge or the cleaning lady is a friend."

But the fire was the first really daunting challenge to face Michele. His parents were heart-broken and paralyzed with fear. His wife shed bitter tears just smelling the Venice air. Dante explains: "La Fenice is more than a hotel, it is a love affair. That is

why Michele went to war for the reconstruction of the opera. He met with the mayor, with the Consortio Venezia Nuova. (CVN, the body in charge of putting out the tender for the reconstruction of the opera). He met with countless lawyers."

"I suppose it is the closest time I have come to facing death," Michele says today, one year after the fire. "I don't mean physical death, but moral death."

The cause of the fire has never been determined; many believe it was ordered by the mafia. But it will soon rise again from its ashes: Fund-raising concerts by artists and musicians as well as private donations for its reconstruction amount to $30 million. Public funds contributed by the government amount to $100 million.

The remaining front and side walls which after the fire threatened to fall on the hotel and kill gaping tourists has been shored up and strengthened. The inside has been cleared of debris. And Venice has completed the tender process and is now selecting the contractor who will do the work (six Italian firms have bid, and one each from Germany, Spain, Switzerland and France). It must be completed within twenty-four months at a cost of $100 million. Work is expected to start June 1997 and to end in 1999, in time for the November opera season that will start the millennium.

What is most interesting about the Facchini family is that they do not act like "owners" of the Fenice hotel. They and their staff, Dante, Paulo, Maria, and more recent hires act as stewards or guardians of a national treasure.

Paulo Saccoman, who this year will be retiring, says, "The charm and beauty of the hotel suffused it long before any of us arrived, and it will survive long after we are gone. Provided, of course, the wind continues blowing in the opposite direction."

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