

# MOONSTRUCK

Directed by Norman Jewison  
Produced by Norman Jewison and Patrick Palmer  
Distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer  
Released in 1987

Americans hate opera. Nobody buys the albums, nobody attends the performances. This is an overstatement for effect. Of course, a few go to look good for Society, and a few are niche-artistes, and a few are hopeless romantics who can take their drama slow, overwrought, and foreign.

There is something special about opera. Like the cinema it incorporates many distinct artistic disciplines into one collective package. And a good opera, with a timeless story and soaring music, will endure. Most of the dreck has been weeded out by the attrition of time. Opera is very expensive to produce; if there is a show, it's probably going to be good.

But there's still the language barrier. There are a few in English, but most musical stage creations in English are operettas or musicals. German and French operas are common, but Italian is by far the biggest.

That's where Americans really miss out. There are some who know Italian, and most are of Italian descent.

In *Moonstruck*, Loretta, played by Cher, goes to the Metropolitan Opera with Ronny Cammareri, played by Nicolas Cage. Loretta is neither an artist nor a connoisseur of art. She's a New Yorker who doesn't even know where the Met is. She decides to accept Ronny's invitation to see Puccini's *La boheme*, ostensibly as a kindness to Ronny, whom she has just slept with, but whose overtures of love she has rejected because she's engaged to his brother and she's afraid if she follows her emotions rather than her intellect she'll wind up husbandless, childless, and alone.

But she really wants to go. She can't let Ronny go yet. She gets her hair done and buys a new dress. At least for one night, she wants to step into another world as a different kind of woman.

The result is the best scene in the movie. Though we've identified with Loretta throughout the film as she's played by a star and she's a sympathetic protagonist, for this one scene she steps away from us. We hear the glories of Puccini's score; we see the tender lighting on the plush snow-swept set. We know something of the thrill she's experiencing going out on an exciting date, sharing a magical night with a person who has awakened true love within her. We see the connection with the doomed characters—Rodolfo and Mimi—as they gently grasp each other's hands; and, in turn, Loretta yields to Ronny's hand. She's letting herself go with that one simple gesture.

The extraordinary part is, she knows Italian. Anyone who is willing to let go of their reverse-snobbery can appreciate sophisticated/ambitious music. But not everyone can understand the language. So though we revel in the moment with Loretta, we're on our own, on the outside looking in. We can see the transformative power in the moment, we can feel her emotion vicariously, but we can't understand fully. There is something influencing her that we

cannot grasp. So there's a mystery there. And the scene may be better because we can't understand. It's like the 'Lara' poems at the end of *Doctor Zhivago*: they're supposed to be Yuri's legacy, an achievement of transcendent beauty, his greatest triumph. But we never hear them, and we cannot read Russian. Therefore, we imagine what they could be as we see their effect on Lara (played exquisitely by Julie Christie). It's also like those horror movies where the scariest moments occur off-screen. Though the visceral impact may be lessened, we're guaranteed not to be let down by an effect that fails to connect. Left to the imagination, the horror is individualized and magnified in the mind of each cinema-goer.

Looking at a different medium, in a book where a girl is described as being of surpassing beauty, but the reader is not granted much detail, he can imagine an ideal visage satisfying such a grandiose claim. He wants to believe. Turn that book into a movie and someone is going to feel cheated, no matter how beautiful the actress.

Maybe that's why the opera scene in *Moonstruck* works so well. If we don't know Italian we have one less thing to be distracted by or critical of. We can accept Loretta's transformation because we're denied all the stimuli that precipitated her ultimate choice of Ronny. But it's also sad because we can't understand something we desperately want to.

In the end, the scene is a reminder that, for all the vicarious thrills we can experience through the wonder of cinema, we have to live outside the theater. Movies should not be an end unto themselves, but should inspire us to find the magic in our own lives.