

La Donna Brazil Sings, On and Off Key

by Michael Curtis



One of the most popular arias in the opera catalogue, sung by the licentious Duke of Mantua in Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto* is the tenor song, *La donna a mobile*. Its opening, *qual piuma al vento* (woman is fickle like a feather in the wind) , is a cynical masculine put down sung by a scoundrel. But its later lines, *muta d'accento e di pensier* (she changes in voice and in thought) are curiously applicable to a real life Donna, the Democratic Party politician Donna Brazile.

This Donna is no novice to local and national party politics in the U.S. She has long been an insider in Democratic party politics. She has been a regular contributor to newspapers and political commentator on TV network programs including CNN, NPR, and ABC. She was campaign manager for Al Gore in 2000 making her the first African-American-American to direct a major campaign.

She was appointed interim chair of the Democratic National

Committee, DNC in spring 2011 again from July 2016 to February 2017 in the Clinton campaign 2016. Her sole aria derives from that experience. With the publication on November 7, 2017 of her new book *Hacks: the Inside Story of the Break-ins and Breakdowns that put Donald Trump in the White House*, and public utterances about it and her activities in the 2016 presidential campaign, she is experiencing her 15 minutes of fame in the national spotlight.

The emergence of Brazile in the limelight and the story she has been telling about the Hillary Clinton campaign 2016 and her own reflections on it has been astonishing partly because of its forthrightness and partly because of its variation in substance from time to time. Yet, as a story it is titilating because it has everything, race, gender, flaming ambitions, moral corruption, and what she calls "titanic egos" of leading Democrats, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton , and Debbie Wasserman-Schultz, the ill fated chair of the DNC, who was obliged to resign as a result of leaked emails showing Democratic party officials trying to sabotage the campaign of Senator Bernie Sanders.

Brazile pulls back the curtain on the electoral campaign with revealing insights, but at the same time the problem is that the curtain is strained and partly torn. There are a number of controversial aspects of the story. Perhaps the central one in the book is that she found an "unethical" agreement between the Clinton campaign and the DNC. This was a joint fund-raising agreement of August 26, 2015 between the DNC, the Hillary Victory Fund, and Hillary for America. It specified that in exchange for raising money and investing in the DNC, the Clinton campaign would control the party's finances, strategy, and money raised. The campaign would be consulted on staff appointments, budgeting and data. Brazille considers this agreement unethical because it was signed in August 2015, almost a year before Hillary was the official nominee of the party.

The questions of ethics aside, the agreement allowed Clinton to influence or control the party long before she became its official nominee. This factor is related to a second issue, the serious question of the rigging of the election in the Democratic primaries. On this Brazille has been ambivalent, even contradictory, stating on November 5, 2017 that she had found no evidence of the party primaries being rigged in favor of Hillary. Yet, in July 2016 she started looking for evidence that rigging had taken place, and found some. As a result Donna replaced Debbie W-S after emails showed she was working to help Hillary and deny Sanders the nomination.

This rigging may not have been a criminal act, but it compromised the integrity of the Democratic Party, since it broke the rule that the party would stay neutral until a nominee had been chosen by vote.

Connected with this is the problem that Brazille does not come with clean hands in this issue as earlier in the Dukakis campaign when she accused George H.W. Bush of racism and of having an extra-marital affair, and was fired.

She finally confessed she had given the Hillary campaign advance warning of expected questions to be raised in Town Hall meetings. On this the evidence is clear as shown by the March 5, 2016 email to John Podesta, the chair of Clinton campaign and Jennifer Palmieri communications director informing them of questions directed to Hillary at the Town Hall meeting the next day. One would come from a "woman with a rash" about the problem of lead poisoning in Flint. A later one was about the death penalty. Indeed, both questions were asked of Hillary. On October 14, 2016, Brazille was fired by CNN which felt uncomfortable about her interaction as a journalist with the Clinton campaign.

A highly controversial issue is Brazille's remarks on the deficiencies and problems of Hillary. Brazille is critical of the campaign. Hillary took minority constituencies for

granted, and made mistakes with “stiff” and “stupid” messages. The campaign was badly mismanaged, and lacked passion. The lack of enthusiasm was even felt in black areas.

But it was the physical problem that most concerned Brazile. After observing that Hillary was suffering from pneumonia and being unsteady on her feet on September 9, and fainting at a 9/11 memorial service at Grand Zero in NYC on September 11, 2016, she considered that VP Joe Biden should replace Hillary on the ticket together with Senator Cory Booker to replace Tim Kaine. Former Clinton staffers have expressed surprise that Brazile had considered replacing Clinton on the ticket, and brought in the familiar Russians. They argue that Brazile had accepted fake Russian fueled propaganda, spread by Russians and political opponents. The caveat in all this is that Brazile as interim chair could not unilaterally replace the ticket, though she could start the process by which the whole DNC could do this.

But flaming egos and political differences are not the whole story. Donna is African American, unmarried, with no evident companion and ambiguous about her sexual orientation. She complained that Hillary staffers treated her like a slave, Patsey, the slave character in the film *12 Years a Slave*: “I’m not going to be your whipping girl.” She considered the Clinton staff was condescending and dismissive towards her. She suggests allegations of sexism by male staffers, though Harvey Weinstein is not mentioned.

The whole affair is revealing for the light shone on leading political characters, and it is good to notice the absence of any collusion with the Russians by anybody, but the story remains perplexing. Was there significant rigging in the Democratic primaries, that Donna at one point calls a “cancer,” in favor of Hillary and against Bernie? The next, and hopefully, final chapter in the saga should come from Bernie and from Biden, the king in waiting though not in Camelot. The opera is not over, even though the “not thin” has

sung.