

Lincoln Center Theater's Platform series presents conversations with artists working at LCT before an audience of interested theatergoers. Admission is free and open to all. Platforms are held in the lobby of the Vivian Beaumont Theater. The following is a transcript, edited for clarity, of the September 21, 2005 Platform with The Leading Ladies of *The Light in the Piazza*:

Ira Weitzman Thank you all. I'm Ira Weitzman. Welcome to Lincoln Center Theater. So nice to see so many of you and so many young people. How many have seen *The Light in the Piazza*? Oh my goodness, how great. How many are members of Lincoln Center Theater? Student members? Cool, we like that. Well, sitting besides me are two of the best performers on Broadway, certainly the lights in our piazza, Ms. Kelli O'Hara and Ms. Victoria Clark.

Victoria Clark and Kelli O'Hara - Hi.

IW So since you've all seen the show I know you have questions for them, we'll take some questions shortly. But just to get us going and to start at the beginning, how did both of you get into show business? Vicki?

VC Ira fully knows the answer to this question. I came to New York to be a director. I was a graduate student in the NYU musical theater program as a director.

IW Where did you come from?

VC I came from Yale. I went to Yale and I grew up in Dallas, Texas. I needed to get out of Texas as soon as possible. I like Texas, but there wasn't a whole lot of theater going on. So I came up here and I had directed a lot in college and really wanted to continue directing. I had sung my whole life in church choirs, studied privately for a long time and acted all the way through high school and college, but also started directing in college. When I was at NYU, I was asked by some of the composers and writers to present their material for Ira Weitzman who was casting at the time. He would watch the material and watch the presentations and then hire equity actors to perform workshops of these original pieces. For example, Winnie Holtzman, David Evans. . .

IW Winnie who co-wrote the book of *Wicked*.

VC . . . *Wicked*, yes. And Jeff London and Art Perlman and George Wolff and some fantastic writers. Ira probably saw me do 200 roles in a year and a half and called me and asked me if I'd be interested in auditioning for *Sunday in the Park with George*, which he was also involved in producing. So I said, sure, because I didn't really come here to act at all. It was a surprise question and I said, "Sure!" It sounded like a fun thing to do. Then I did actually book *Sunday in the Park*. I understudied seven roles in that. Then the doors kept opening for me as an actor and I just kept walking through the doors that were open. So that's my story.

KO I really should have gone first. Mine is much shorter. I grew up in Oklahoma so we're not too far from each other. I studied there through high school and with the same teacher named Florence Birdwell at Oklahoma City University where I got a degree in opera. I really thought about getting my masters in opera and continuing on that road, but there was something in me that couldn't do it. I wanted to be an actor. I wanted to broaden that into plays, so on and so forth. So I ripped up applications to grad schools and I packed my bags and moved here the year I graduated from college. I've been here for 7 years this month. The rest is kind of history. I got a tour, which led to a Broadway show and a couple of more Broadway shows, and this. I've landed and I'm very happy.

IW There were two productions prior to the Lincoln Center Theater production of *The Light in the Piazza*. The first in Seattle and the other in Chicago. Both of you were in each of them. Kelli, in both of those productions, played the role of Franca. I'm curious from each of your points-of-view how the productions changed leading up to New York.

VC Want to go first?

KO Yes. Well, they've changed hugely for me because I saw this show from an entirely different perspective. There is the Fabrizio and Clara couple, the fresh new love. And then you have Guiseppe and Franca, the old--whatever they're going through--love. I had many thoughts on that before but I let them go away. I'm not playing Franca any more so I looked at the whole piece differently. It's changed in many, many

great ways and then it's changed in little tiny ways. So you'd say that this piece started as a wonderful and complete package, all the way back to Sundance where we did the first workshop. But the way it's been built upon, the set, the costumes, the lights, the way they've changed, the way they've been expanded, has just broadened the heart of the piece. Some of the cast changes, including myself, make it just a fuller piece for me. That's basically what I feel. But I feel the same about now as I did the first day I ever heard it. It was just that kind of piece.

IW Kelli, what kind of adjustment was it going from playing Franca to playing Clara?

KO Well, it sure did shock me. I don't think that I felt that it was going to be as big of an adjustment as it was. I was playing such a different kind of person, a person that I have to admit, I may have connected with better than I do Clara because I have lost love. I have been bitter. I have felt hurt or deceived. However, I have never been handicapped or kicked by a horse. But it's not just that. It's hard to remember how it feels to be so open to the world, to accept things for the first time. You think that you can do that and you think putting young phrases in there and making your voice sound higher will do that for you, and it just didn't. I still learn everyday. I am not finished with my transition. My process is frustrating and beautiful and challenging and I think it's a daily forever thing. I learn something new in the show all the time. Whereas, I think that you can put your hand around Franca a little bit more. I probably will never know Clara completely.

IW And, Vicki, because you played the same role, you had a little bit of a different experience, I'm sure. But from my point-of-view, observing it from one city to the other and here, it seems to me that your portrayal of Margaret has gotten much deeper. I'm wondering how you're feeling about it.

VC Well, definitely, the longer you have to work on a character, the more you can explore it and the more you can take risks. Now I feel that my work on her is much more fluid, I'd say. I don't predict how she's going to respond to certain things. I just let the response be a little more improvisational and that just comes with trusting the character and knowing so well who she is, as well as the complexities and the contrasts of that character. The writing is so very, very complex, that it allows us to try different things. Even in Seattle, Craig, Bart and Adam would give me adjustments like that every preview. I sort of likened it to the different street car systems outside of Vienna where I studied when I was in college. When I was studying there, I would take a street car to the end of the line and just walk around. Sometimes I would just be in the woods and sometimes I'd be on a beautiful mountain path or sometimes I'd be in a little village outside the city. They'd say, tonight we want her to be completely cold and removed. Even from Clara. And then I would do that and really commit to that choice and then they would come running back after the show and say, "That was great. You did exactly what we asked. Don't ever do it that way again, ever, ever, ever." Then the next day they'd say, "Let everything crack you up. Let everything in Florence, you have such a light heart that everything warms you." Those were golden opportunities because we were not in New York. We had a fantastic, diverse audience there, very supportive in both Seattle and Chicago and it allowed us to really take big chances, which I don't think that we would have tried here.

IW And now that we've been running awhile, does it still differ from night to night for both of you?

VC I'd say, I don't know, have any of you come to see the show more than once? (many hands rise)

IW Wow.

VC Of those same people, have you ever come more than twice? More than three times? (many hands rise again)

IW My goodness.

VC More than four times? {Laughter}

IW Door prize in the back. . .

VC So I guess I could ask you why you keep coming back. I would hope that you might say it's because you know that you're not going to see the same performance. That's something that we take pride in, is that you're not going to see something that's canned and boiled down. We really try to make it spontaneous and alive every night. And that's pretty much the way we we're all trained. So we are sort of a family in the way we look at the piece and we try to keep it very alive. So I would say it's different every single night.

IW And, Kelli, about the original Fabrizio, Matthew Morrison, who recently left the show. And now we have

our wonderful Aaron Lazar playing Fabrizio. What kind of adjustment is that for you playing opposite somebody and then having that person change?

KO It's a very big change. It's very hard. But it's also extremely exciting. We've just gotten to a point where we've been running long enough that we kind of needed a little sizzle, something to change things up. But that's a lot of change. Aaron is really different from Matt in that there's calmness to Matt and then there is excitability to Aaron, which actually makes Clara different. I'm changing parts of my character all over again, and it's a welcome change. Matt was real suave. And I would say that Aaron is that adorable, kind of tripping over, falling in love type of guy that you can't help but put him in your arms and love him. So my attraction to him, just as it would be in real life, and my chemistry with him is a whole new kind of chemistry. It's actually wonderful and it plays into the cuteness of the relationship. It plays into the lightness, the fun, the understanding between the two of them. Within the story, it still works. You may have had more heat in one and now you have more falling into each other's arms happy--thank God we found each other--type of love. And those are beautiful things and those are kind of the ones that last, I think. Aaron brings that to me and it's a wonderful change. I look forward to the new things every day. And we're building it. We've had, I think, 21 shows and we're stacking it.

IW Vicki, you're now playing opposite Chris Sarandon, who plays Signor Naccarelli. Is it different for you?

VC Absolutely. I think Chris just finished his 8th or 9th show. So he's just starting his 10th show. Anyway, he's just beginning and he's doing a fantastic job. He's very different. He's very witty. I tremendously respect his process because he's not going to a fake finish product. He's really laying it in very carefully and slowly and I respect that. He's not going for immediate results. He's going for something that's truthful for him right now. This is not an easy piece to step into because we've loved it and worked on it for so long. For three years.

IW Kelli and Vicki have been performing this for a number of years already. But we started our rehearsal process here for a month, then previewed for a month, and when somebody replaces, in a Broadway show, usually they rehearse for a couple of weeks. And then their real work comes when they start performing. So that's really what you're talking about.

VC We are, and it doesn't help any of us because we have to see what they're bringing to the piece. Sometimes, a fresh, spontaneous look at a piece of theater and its relationship can add something that's very valuable, alive and fresh. So for us to say, "I'm not sure, no, no, no." We have to accept their point-of-view because it's new and it's valid. So we run with it.

KO I find this musical to be so different, so play-like because of the nature of the relationships. I think in a lot of musicals things are blocked, things are set. It's a dance number and you sing it just so, and you act it just so. When we talk about how much we change every night, it's because we've developed real relationships. Vicki and I have a very, very real relationship outside this theater. And I think that on the stage, I think that we can swim in that relationship. If she's angry, if I'm sad or angry about something, the play is different. And then I react differently. Aside from one or two rehearsals, the first performance with Aaron felt like our first time on stage together. To really get to know him? We're doing that while you're watching. The same is true with Vicki and Chris. So it's one of these things where it's definitely a process and only with time do they marinate and become something really wonderful, I hope.

IW If I may just comment, I think that the chemistry is fabulous with our new cast members and it's exciting to watch you perform with them, perform in the subtle ways that you've changed.

KO Well, they're both fantastic guys.

VC Beautiful. It's true.

IW What questions do you have out there?

Q What is Ms. O'Hara's experience working with Ricky Gordon and Adam Guettel, two relatively new composers and lyricists for the theater. What is the experience like?

KO Well, I think that when you study something for so long and that's what you love and that's what is natural to you, you're looking for that. I wanted to do musical theater and straight theater and I fell into some things that weren't natural for me. When I found Adam, Ricky and their music, I kind of felt that all the decisions that I had made were the right ones because I came home a little bit. I was able to go with

wonderful books and roles and act them. And then when I opened my mouth to sing, it was in the way that I learned. So in a way, I'm scared of ever leaving that, that little wonderful island that I found because it's the only way for me to feel whole really. So we do a lot of things with our voices and characters and with our acting. But when you can actually feel like I trained my whole life for this and now I'm in a safe place, then you want to stay there and that's what my experience has been. I hope to always work with people like that.

IW Any other questions?

Q What is the derivation of the subtle changes in Kelli's performance over the last few months?

KO Well, I think that even before Aaron came, I think that what I was talking about, trying to find Clara is daily, day-by-day. I open that part of myself that was closed for so long. The part that still believes in things, that still gets overly excited and makes ridiculous choices as a child would. I started to feel more comfortable with doing that. Now with Aaron, that was a simple thing. When Fabrizio says, "Your skin is like milk." I used to turn around at that moment, Matt stayed still. Aaron chose to turn around, so I stayed still. And in standing still, it didn't feel like Clara so I jumped up and down a little bit and there we have that.

IW Kelli, how hard is it to play somebody that is so different from you and has such particular qualities?

KO Well, people ask me all the time, are you having a blast? You must be having so much fun. And the truth of it is, of course, I feel I am in the right place. But the role is not a good time. If anyone ever said that this role was a good time for them, I don't know that they would ever be getting who she is at all. We're watching her at the point of her life where she is starting to discover and starting to break open some answers that she's been confused about for 14 years. So I think that what I feel every night is a lot of frustration. If I connected with Clara the way I have connected with Franca or a different character like that, I think I would feel great fulfillment. Because I don't, because I'm searching for who she is as she is searching for who she is, I feel great amounts of frustration every night. And I'm starting to be okay with that. But at the same time, I don't want to get used to it because then I think that I might be going to a place that is not interesting. Yeah, it's very hard to play someone who you're not capable of fully becoming.

IW Vicki, the same question for you, but from a different angle. Are there qualities of Margaret that are qualities of Vicki?

VC Absolutely. When I start to build characters, I look at how they intersect with my life and me. That's the first thing I do, find out how they're like me. Even if it's only a couple of ways. In this case, there are quite a few similarities and the reason why I feel so safe in this particular character is because I'm actually modeling her on real people that I know. In my head, I have a picture of several women that she's a composite of, women in my family actually. Women I know very, very well. There's hardly a thing that she says or sings that isn't something that I haven't seen. I don't really think that I can say that about other characters I've played. This doesn't mean that it's easy because a lot of what you look at when you look at Margaret is pretty painful stuff. And, a lot of what she's going through is something that I have gone through. So I am quite close to her in many ways. That gives me a tremendous feeling of safety and gives me the ability to play the broad contrasts with security and with truth because I know that these women exist and they're real, and Margaret is real to me.

IW Any other questions? Yes?

Q I work with people with disabilities and I would like to ask Kelli how she came to such a sensitive portrayal.

KO We did go through a huge process. There were shows in previews, I don't know if any of you saw them, where just like Vicki said, Bart asked her to play it completely cold. There were shows when I was to play it completely obvious. I had a tic. I had things wrong with me physically. We tried all those things, which I built upon, but took away. They're inside me. My main goal for Clara was to be sensitive to that. I didn't want anyone calling a spade a spade. You're not handicapped and you're pretending to be and it's offending me. I didn't want to do that. What was important with her is that in going or studying or asking anybody about brain trauma, the result is from here to here. Anything can happen to a human being. There is no tried and true result of brain trauma. So what I had to do is just be a person. She's a person. She can do anything she wants. She can handle some situations really, really well and then she can be thrown completely like anyone. So the most important thing for me to do was to use the text, use what I had been given from beginning to end. The most important thing within that structure was to become a person I was sympathetic towards and that I could understand, connect with and feel if I were to watch her. Not that you had to feel sorry for her all the time, but that you could actually relate to her. So I just wanted her to be real and I hope

that's what you get.

IW You have a question, yes.

Q What is Ms. O'Hara feeling when she says, at the end of the show, "I can't leave you, Mother."

KO When I say the words, I don't know how too. I'm still not sure if I can. This is a person who will always have questions. We're not going to live in this world and pretend like she's perfect now. This is one last moment to say, "I don't know how." And she's released.

VC I think that change came in very late in the preview process.

IW It did.

VC We had a lot of different lines that we went through there. In Chicago, we tried a whole big scene in the church and then we went through several different lines. I remember we were sitting there. It was very late in the preview process, Craig Lucas had his computer and he was sitting in the front row with his cap on and he jumped up and threw the computer. He said, "I got it, I got it, I got it, I got it, I got it. I can't leave you." We're all looking at him and thinking, you can't leave what? "I can't leave you. Clara says, I can't leave you, and Margaret says, yes, you can. Try that." It went in that night and that was it. It came fairly late. It was definitely the last week of previews that we put it in.

IW It does make a big difference, doesn't it?

Q Oh, a world of difference. And just to follow up, I'm a mother and, Vicki, I know you're a mother, too. Adam Guettel's music makes me feel things that I would prefer that I didn't even know were inside of me. I prefer to keep them locked away. But I have to say having seen it, maybe the third time I saw it, I was envious of Margaret for having a child who would always be a child. I've got a man now that comes to see me quite frequently. But I don't have a child anymore. And I should not even want to admit that. It came out.

VC Well, I actually thought about that quite a bit because my son, we're not going to point him out, but he's right there in the third row. He just turned eleven and he's already growing up and it's nice, I'm really glad you said that because it is great to have someone who you know depends on you so much because you feel needed and you feel worthwhile and you feel like you're doing a good job. Clara has more or less stayed in this needy state her whole life. So it is, it does make it harder to let go. Definitely.

IW Margaret has stayed in a needy state in some ways herself, don't you think?

VC Yes. That would be a whole other discussion. But yes, there is a lot of need there and Clara has become the primary relationship because of the missing Roy [Margaret's husband] link. Clara is definitely the primary relationship for Margaret. So she's really poured all of her love into the child.

IW It's quite a layered show, isn't it? What other questions do we have, anybody, anybody up there? Yes, sir?

Q How do you preserve your voices eight times a week and are able to give 100% all the time?

VC Well, Kelli and I share similar horse-like qualities. We're thoroughbreds. Our teachers, people that really respected and drilled real technique into us, trained us both in very similar ways. And I give all the credit to my voice teacher, Eddie Sayegh, because for the last 20 years, he's been training me how to make my vocal cords flexible and strong and stamina is the issue. It has to do with nutrition and rest. But if your vocal cords are trained, you're doing the right exercises and your technique is strong, you could do eight a week, easily.

IW Do you warm up before every show? Do you have a process that you want to share?

VC Basically, because of the way that my vocal show is built, I'm usually warmed up from the previous performance for the next day. I find that with trying different ratios of how much I use my voice during the day, I find that it's best to rest, not talk or sing very much at all until I get here. I warm up very, very briefly before the show just to check all parts of my range and all the different registers. But usually I'm pre-warmed up from the previous night's performance. So in order for my voice to sound fresh, I do very little singing before I get here.

IW Kelli, what about you in terms of maintaining the show?

KO I think that I give a lot of credit to my voice teacher and to my father whose work ethic has influenced me tremendously. I exercise. I think that every day for me has to begin with some sort of exertion, like getting my heart rate up, just trying to be physically healthy. This isn't a life where it's full of lots of fun and parties, especially with this show. We go home and we go to sleep and then a special event may be an audition or something like that. I usually try to be quiet. Yeah, it's demanding. I sometimes feel like an athlete. Like if I let go, if I let down a little bit, it might not be there for me and sometimes it's not. 100% every show is really hoping for a lot.

VC Since I am a mom, the school year has started. So we're up at 6:45 or 7:00. So my day is about living in the moment and it doesn't really stop. I don't take my nap, read my fan mail and eat my bon bons. It's like classic New York working mother, go, go, go, go, go, flying through the stage door, sign in, say hi to everybody, make a couple of jokes, crack up, run up and down the hall, get the tea.

KO See that's where you win. She does the "hi" and the jokes. I just go to my room.

VC But it's the same deal. If I sat down to rest, I would sleep for 4 hours and I'd miss the show. So my preparation is just about keeping the feet on pedals and just going, and going, and going. So that's my exercise. You know, cleaning out the cat box, walking the dog and then when I come here, I'm still in that state of life, so it's not like I go away and contemplate. I'm staying in the moment.

KO My other instigation for showing up and doing 100% is because if Vicki can do it, I have to do it. She's unbelievable. I just have to keep up with her.

IW Yes, sir.

Q Since you have eight shows a week and are always getting accustomed to the relationships on stage, how is it different when there is an understudy on?

VC Well, remember we're playing mother and daughter. So playing family members, and especially this relationship, which one assumes, even though she's 26, we're side-by-side all day long. We go shopping together. I mean we could sit down and read you all the lists of things that we come up with that we do. So it's very symbiotic, this relationship. It's like moss on a tree. Also, we need each other. So when an understudy goes on, they have to be instant family. It's like a stepsister that just married into the family suddenly, and yet she's still family. You can't turn your back on the understudy and say, "Oh Kelli, always kisses me on my left cheek in this scene." You have to really embrace them in what they bring and make whatever substitutions as real and as deep as possible. Welcome them! I've understudied before. It's very, very difficult. But especially in these two parts, there's nothing to do but open your arms to them and say, "Listen, if you can get through this show without vomiting and falling down, you have done great." Seriously. I've told all the understudies if you pass out, I will drag you around by your hair. If you get sick, we'll help you. If anything happens, if you goof up on a line, we'll feed it to you. We'll make stuff up, we'll improvise, we'll move furniture. Just live, just breathe. Do your best and we will be there for you because what else can you ask from them? They're doing an amazingly difficult job, singing an incredibly difficult score. You have to love them for signing the contract that says that they'll do that gig. It's a very hard gig.

KO Because of the strong bond I share with Vicki, I depend on her for so much off the stage. For example, I called her on the phone in the dressing room. "What are you doing for dinner? What do I do? Do you want to get dinner?" I make all my decisions with her help for some reason. So whenever Patty Cohenour, who is fantastic, an unbelievable performer, singer, actor, everything, plays this role, I almost couldn't deal with it for a couple of days. I needed that structure over me. As Patti got her feet into it, it got there, it was great.

VC Plus the fact that Patti is like mini-Margaret. She's tiny. She plays Senora Naccarelli in the show and Kelli kind of looks down at her and. . . [Laughter.]

KO Right. I felt like my whole ground was all off for a little bit. And I have a little problem with change. But anyway, it grew to something very different and very special, but that's something that you have to allow for because your heart just gets all twisted up in it and it's really hard if it's not the way it is.

IW We have time for a couple more questions. Yes?

Q Kelli, what do you miss or not miss about being Franca?

KO Oh, I love that question. I miss so much about it. I loved playing Franca. I'm so much more about the challenge, so I'm so thankful where I am. Franca was this part of me that you don't get to show, but you feel.

VC Like the public voice.

KO You know, it was a deeper, it was darker, sexier, stronger part of me that I often have not gotten a chance to play. The passionate way Adam wrote the music for Franca's character. I just loved it. So I miss it all, the costumes, putting my hair in a dark wig and hiding behind this person. Hiding. I miss hiding. I can't hide behind Clara really. She's a version of me. I love being Clara, but I miss everything about Franca.

IW One more question.

Q How has singing Adam's music changed or affected you?

VC If I had to say what Adam's work is to me in one sentence, it's that Adam's music is a psychological extension of the acting moment. So in other words, whatever is happening in the scene, when speech turns into sung lyric, it's an extension and a vibration of that rather than something else, which in a lot of musicals as we know, the scene stops. There's an introduction to the song and then the song comes from a different place in the character. It comes from a different place in the universe. His work is an extension of that and I think it has to do with the way that he collaborates with Craig and with his other collaborators, like Tina Landau. But also he's very deeply inside the character when he writes. So he will put his Margaret hat on and then he will put his Clara hat on and then he'll put his Franca hat on. And so what you're hearing is subtext and text simultaneously, which is what the great composers do. To be able to go along and do a scene and then suddenly, your not actually aware of when you start to sing. That's the biggest compliment that I can give Craig and Adam. Actually a cousin of mine came to see the show and said, "You know, I know you sang. I was aware that you were singing, but at the end of the show, I had to stop and figure out what the songs were, because to me it was all communication. It was all one thing."

IW Okay, just one more question. Right here in the front.

Q What is the difference between the novel and the show and did you deal at all with the novel in preparing your character?

KO Yeah, we all read it. I think that to musicalize something is to make it larger, to expand it, to lift off into another more emotional place. With the novella, we had to take from that basic story, even the character of Clara, who is much smaller in her personality, because it was safer. You can sit her there in the book. You can talk about her chestnut hair. You can talk about what she looks like and how she's drawing and how she's sitting and how she's feeling. But I have to show it, I have to give it, I have to be feeling it. It's all larger than what is on the written page. It's life. Therefore, rather than using your imagination to fit the written text, we are actually living the imagination. So I think I use the text as my basis, my ground for her. But I couldn't leave her there because there would be no person that you could grow to know unless you imagined her. And if you were imagining her while I was doing it, then I would be awful. I need you to go with me. I think that Vicki will say the same because they have become more, that's what we do as actors. We bring ourselves to it and intertwine. And then you have a fuller, different type of thing.

IW Well, I would urge you all to see the show, but that doesn't seem necessary. So please tell your friends to come see *The Light in the Piazza* because hopefully we'll be here for a long time. Thank you for coming tonight.