

'It's My First Opera. I'm Going To Stay for the Whole Thing.'

By **BRADLEY HOPE**

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When the curtain at the Metropolitan Opera inched up yesterday, Times Square did something it rarely does: It paused.

The gaudy lights still doused the streets, and nothing could stop a waiter from the Bubba Gump Company from loudly trying to lure in customers — but the honks took a break, and those rushing home from the towers of Midtown stood to the side, taking in the opening night of "Madame Butterfly" on three giant screens. The opera was also broadcast on a screen outside Lincoln Center, though the crowd there was more black-tie than the spectrum of New Yorkers at 42nd Street.

"I think I'll stay a little while," a nurse at New York Hospital, Rose Chin, said. She had run into the sleek set-up — an array of more than 1,000 pure red and black chairs set up on the asphalt

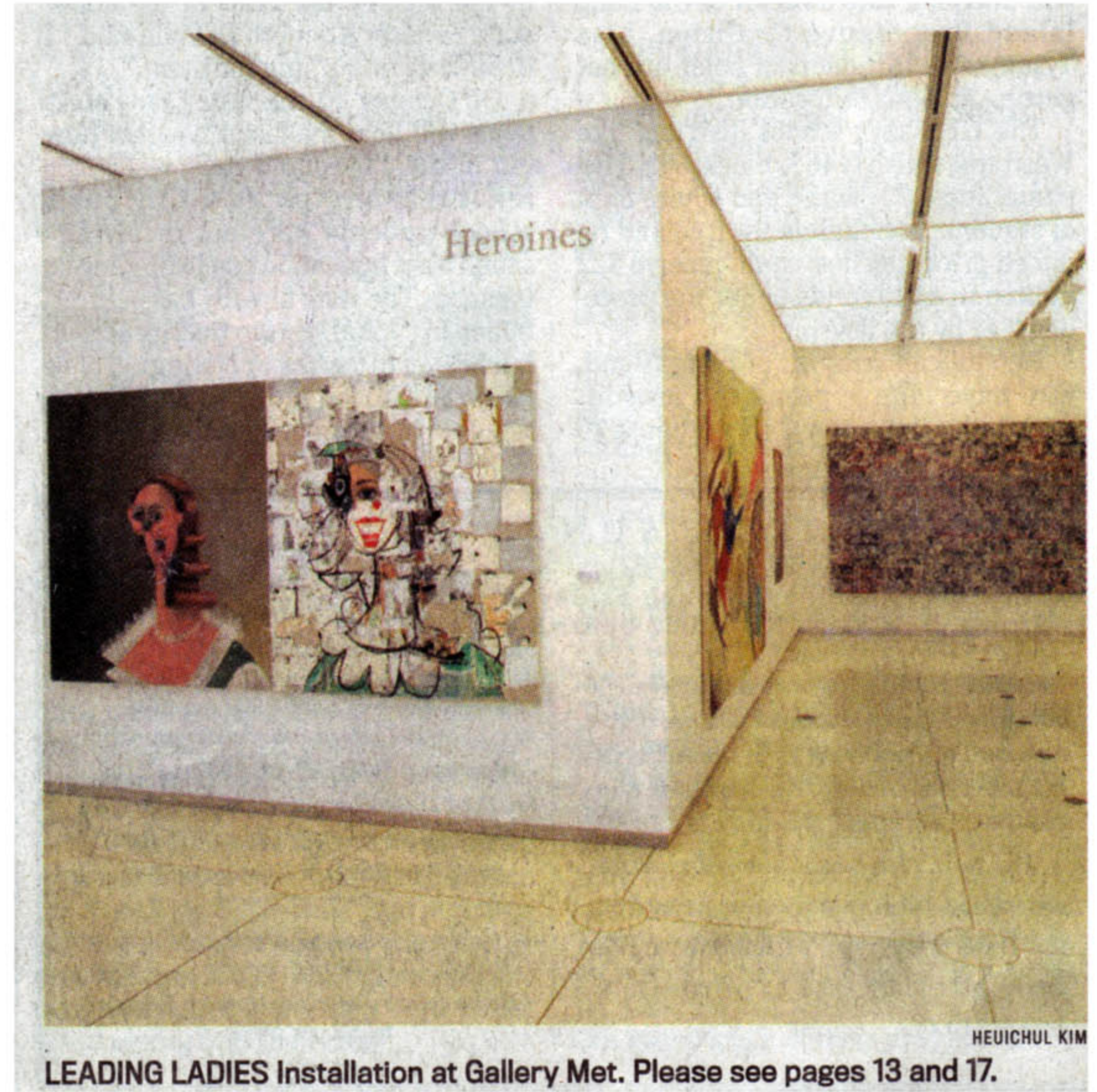
of Broadway — on her way from the bus to the subway. She said she had seen her share of musicals and movies, but never an opera.

A carpenter at New York University, Jean Demesmin, came across the broadcast on his way back to his home in Spring Valley, N.Y.

"It's my first opera," he said, leaning against a telephone booth with his arms crossed. "I'm going to stay for the whole thing."

Among the crowd were actresses, warehouse workers, tourists, and a sales clerk from Macy's. Some had planned to come days in advance. Others simply stopped mid-step, struck by the sheer novelty of an opera in Times Square, clearly audible from speakers set up to go with the giant screens.

The free broadcasts on the opening night of the Metropolitan Opera's season are part of an effort led by the new
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LEADING LADIES Installation at Gallery Met. Please see pages 13 and 17.

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general manager, Peter Gelb, to increase the appeal and access of the art form. Last night Mr. Gelb estimated that the opera was seen by more than 8,000 people, compared to the about 3,000 who ordinarily fill the opera house. The company gave out thousands of free tickets to the opera's dress rehearsal last week.

At Lincoln Center, the likes of Salman Rushdie, Rudy Giuliani, and David Bowie walked down the red carpet, while students stood in the courtyard drinking beer from plastic cups. A tuxedoed lawyer waiting for his date, Craig Garnett, said he enjoyed the collision of the two worlds: old and new.

Thousands Get a Night at the Opera

"It's an amazing sight," he said. "It seems emblematic of everything the Met is doing to appeal to a younger audience."

And in a city of a thousand diversions, many people seemed thrilled by the idea of a new, free evening activity.

"It's just kind of something different to do," Michelle Choi, who works in arts administration, said. "People who wouldn't usually come to the opera come because it's free."

Earlier in the afternoon, a few feet from where the Metropolitan's sleek

chairs were being set up at Times Square, MTV hosted a short concert with Nelly Furtado and a crowd of several hundred ecstatic fans seizing to a version of the latest hit single, "Promiscuous Girl." On the other side, less than a hundred less-youthful-looking opera fans were waiting to enter the seating area. The scene presented the first of a series of sharp contrasts for the evening.

The advertising screens were, for once, a place where movement, music, and color were in unison. And the seats were

filled with a wider slice of New York than the stereotype of the Lincoln Center set.

"Most of the people here couldn't afford the price of an opening night ticket," an actress waiting at Times Square, Kristine Sutherland, said. "I could go to Lincoln Center anytime. But at Times Square I didn't know what to expect. That was part of the excitement."

A warehouse worker from Ashland, N.J., Don Mackle, stared up at the screen and said, "Never in my life." By taking a seat he was delaying his commute across the Hudson for several hours, but it was a worthy diversion, he said. "I would never go to opera if it wasn't free," he said. "Who knows? I might like it."