

THE REFLECTION OF NEGATIVE SOCIAL PHENOMENA IN CONTEMPORARY OPERA PRACTICE¹

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Abstract: There are two approaches that dominate contemporary opera performances. The first may be characterised as producing a subtle, aesthetic and stylistic means of expression. The second runs up visual, interpretation and content means to their maximum expressivity and the audience is exposed to violence, sex and experience disgust. This paper analyses specific productions by renowned European theatre and opera directors, in order to shed light on the way in which opera directors cope with the threat of terrorism, sexual violence, and the impact of the mass media upon the moral belief system of modern man. Within the context of the bold productions of European theatre-makers Slovak opera theatre seems conservative, gravitating towards the aesthetic aspect of opera.

Key words: European opera; Slovak opera; the message of opera production; contemporary production trends; the visual means of expression; negative social phenomena; terrorism; moral values.

Introduction

There are two approaches that dominate contemporary opera performances. The first may be characterised as producing a subtle, aesthetic and stylistic means of expression. The second maximises expressivity in terms of the interpretation, the content and the visual aspect and the audience is exposed to violence and sex and may experience disgust. This paper analyses specific productions by renowned European theatre and opera directors (Martin Kušej, Graham Vick) in order to shed light on the way in which opera directors cope with the threat of terrorism (*La clemenza di Tito*, Salzburger Festspiele 2006; *Mosé in Egitto*, Rossini Opera Festival Pesaro 2011), sexual violence (*Rusalka*, Bayerische Staatsoper 2010), and the impact of the mass media upon the moral belief systems of modern man (*The Rake's Progress*, Theater an der Wien 2010). Within the context of the bold productions of European theatre-makers, Slovak opera seems conservative, gravitating towards the aesthetic aspect of opera.

Up until recently, knowledge in all areas of human life was considered a highly valued and painstakingly acquired asset. Opera audiences had to travel to places where

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opera productions were staged, since secondary sources (reviews, published photos of performances) were unable to provide an authentic experience. In our era of internet sites that flood the theatre-goer with gigabytes of audiovisual images, televised transmissions, cinema projections and DVDs making hundreds of opera productions available to the viewer, creative professionals, aspiring for original theatre figures, find themselves in a particularly complex situation. Contemporary European theatre directors who are motivated by theatrical ambitions and the opportunity to convey musical and vocal experiences typically choose one of two methods that shape modern theatre practice. The first builds on a subtle, aesthetic and stylized means of expression, and on conveying imaginativeness through the use of light, colour, film and computer technologies (the evocative light and colour compositions by Robert Willson) are worth a mention here). The second boosts the visual, the interpretation and the content to maximum expressivity and aggressively attacks the viewer's response: the audience is presented with violence and sex. Sometimes this occurs in an explicit form, at other times it is in the form of a disturbing allusion that relies on the imaginativeness and (first-hand or media-communicated) life experiences of the viewer.

Global threat of militant violence

The events of 11 September, 2001 were a deep blow to the self-confidence of Western civilization and revealed a fragility and unfounded belief in the universal feeling of security. This frustration was bound to have repercussions in theatre art. The Austrian opera director, Martin Kušej, known for his provocative ideas on classical opera opuses, staged Mozart's last operatic work, *La clemenza di Tito* [The Clemency of Titus] as part of the 2006 Salzburger Festspiele (in honour of the 250th anniversary of the birth of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart). Kušej's ideas were motivated by his personal fear of violence, the current nihilistic form of which is to be found in terrorism. "Shock from such attacks arises from recognition that there are no longer rules, values, and safety" (Kuşej 2006, 13.). Kušej's bleak vision traces the twenty-four hour journey into the night of the terrorist attack and the burning down of the Capitol in Rome. The production and the interpersonal relations within it are laced throughout with an atmosphere of anguish, frustration and lack of freedom. Despotic Emperor Titus's megalomaniac building project, which was to become a symbol of the rule of the Roman State and of the tyrant, ends in flames. There is an opulent scene by Jens Kilian in which an evocative structure compartmentalized into dozens of tiny rooms was set ablaze after an assault by masked terrorists. Kušej portrayed this society where one cannot trust one's neighbour as being the world of our time and not that of Mozart's. The *Verfremdungseffekt* scene, where a mob of tourists dressed in contemporary clothing cameras breaks into Titus's bedroom, on display in a museum, initially nurtures the viewer's hope that it is of no concern to him. However, a few minutes later, the mob, intoxicated by smoke, staggers out of the blazing Capitol. The production ends with a scene that leaves a most unpleasant taste in the mouth for audiences of today. Traumatized by the daily news filled with violence and humiliation, the triumphant mob splits up into couples while the final choir lauds Titus' generosity and graciousness. The couples then take their seats at restaurant tables placed in dozens of small cubicles, thus producing the effect of a refracted and multiplied image of a bee's-eye-view. Each small table is approached by a small boy. The

couples remove the boy's white shirt and placed him on a laid table. The contrast between the buoyant music of the choir singing praises and the shocking visual image is most disturbing.

The irreconcilability of cultures and the relentless threat of terrorism prompted the staging of *Mosé in Egitto* [Moses in Egypt] (Rossini Opera Festival Pesaro, 2011). German director Graham Vick, like Kušej, is known for his unorthodox approach to opera, and he bluntly imposed his own politically committed artistic vision on Rossini's work within the genre of "azione tragica-sacra".

On entering the foyer, the audience pause at police missing person notices, containing notes handwritten by desperate family members, searching for the missing victims of terrorist acts. During the prelude the stage fills up with people dressed in Arab clothes smeared with blood and wearing typical headscarves and bands. They come out onto the stage and from amidst the audience, and with a questioning look on their faces they show photos of their beloved ones to the audience. A tall man carries the lifeless body of a child in his arms; Egypt suffers from plagues which are the Lord's punishment for the enslaving of the chosen Hebrew nation. This is all found in the libretto to Rossini's opera, inspired by the Old Testament. However, Graham Vick introduces a dramatically different concept: God's plagues have nothing in common with the Heavenly Father, they are the consequence of human violence hidden behind a veil of noble ideas. Moses' costume (a camouflage army jacket and a traditional white turban) clearly alludes to Usama bin Ladin. In his prayer, the Jewish leader does not turn to God or to his brothers in arms but to an amateur video camera so that he and his brother Aaron can post a video on the Internet in support of his campaign.² With the next of God's plagues, when, according to the Old Testament, the Egyptians were rained on by fire rain, the Jews throw open their gowns to reveal flickering bombs tied around their bodies and the stage and auditorium are illuminated by deadly red flickering lights. In Vick's secularized version of the biblical intervention, the scene of the cruellest plagues, when the Pharaoh's successor and all the first-born sons of the Egyptian nation are to die, is portrayed as a terrorist act, as a gas attack by the Jews against the Egyptians.

In the third act of Rossini's opera the biblical Hebrew Red Sea crossing is set to music: while Moses holds up his staff, the water parts as if it were a wall on his right hand and on his left, and the Israelites are then able to walk across the dry seabed. The Old Testament says that when the infuriated Egyptians tried to follow the Jews, the waters closed and they all drowned. In Vick's interpretation the Egyptian army perishes under a huge tank flying the Israeli flag that emerges from the back wall of the stage. A young Israeli soldier gets out of the tank and approaches the Pharaoh's stool, next to which stands an Egyptian boy. The child ties a bomb around his body and waits for the young soldier who beckons to him and with a friendly gesture offers him a chocolate bar. The message of the director's message is clear: he who sows the wind, shall reap the whirlwind. Faced with tank guns pointing at you reconciliation is impossible.

² Opera professionals often rely on the knowledge of the audience and their ability to interpret the stage references to the actual event. Moshe Leiser and Patrice Caurier, producers of Händl's opera *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* [Julius Caesar in Egypt] (Salzburger Festspiele 2012), when creating the character of Ptolemy, the brother of Cleopatra, allowed themselves to be inspired by the sexual deviant Uday Hussein.

The audiences at the Pesaro Opera Festival, largely composed of local director Gioacchino Rossini's fans and guardians of his artistic message, saw Vick's rendering of Rossini's tragic and sacral opera as scandalous; which may have been intentional on Vick's part. If we discount ignorance of the spiritual essence of the story, which is sacred in Judeo-Christian culture, and consider that he merely relegated Rossini's score to the level of "background music", then this bleak artistic vision of the world in which there is no point in God and violence gives rise to violence, becomes a highly topical attack on the conscience of mankind.

Consumerism and social indifference to the cruelty

The global threat of militant violence is a popular theme in contemporary opera. Opera productions have become an effective medium for communicating important messages about negative social phenomena, consumerism and the non-existence of moral values.

While Martin Kušej responded to the global threat of terrorism in his *La Clemenza di Tito* [The Clemency of Titus], he focuses on a seemingly less fatalistic phenomenon in his inspirational production of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* (Theater an der Wien 2008). Nonetheless, in this production the moral state of society is even more alarmingly distorted in its portrayal of the impact of showbusiness and reality TV on people today. Never before has the mass media craze for finding the most beautiful, the most talented, the most successful, and the most exotic individuals been so intense as it is today; never before has privacy been of so little value. We live the lives of others through the mass media, ignorant of the fact that our own lives are passing us by. Those who are not discussed, debated and seen on TV are second-class citizens. And yet, watch out! "Since Eve went out with Adam: For idle hands and hearts and minds the Devil finds a work to do" warns the opera's epilogue.

Igor Stravinsky composed the opera in 1951 in "the old style" inspired by the early 18th century moralistic pictures. Recognizing the potential pitfalls in the stage production of his work, he chose future producers according to genre: *The Rake's Progress* is about morality. Martin Kušej elevated the composer's comment to the central interpretative principle of his production. The story of young, carefree Tom Rakewell is set in the Vienna of 2008. In his rush for riches, happiness and success, the main protagonist, Tom, sacrifices his love for faithful Anne. He then has to fight for his life in the final duel with the Mephistophelean Nick Shadow at the expense of losing his mind. The production unfolds on stage while a reality TV show and TV reports can be seen on a TV screen. Kušej plays at anticipating the future plot using subliminal messages in overt and covert advertisements. Right from the outset, the TV screen is an integral part of the production, and the theatrical and film components are interlinked in a fascinating way through multi-layer semantic representations and technical perfection. Kušej adds to the morality with harsh visuals. None of these, however, are obscene or represent ends in themselves; they simply express the foreboding philosophy behind the director's ideas.

The environment that Tom is introduced to by the devilish Nick Shadow is basically a materialization of spiritual devastation. In a soberly appointed pornographic studio, full of naked extras with unsightly bodies and bored faces, Shadow, the producer, shoots their mechanical sexual intercourse. The audience sees this automated sex, void of passion and eroticism, in dual vision—both directly on stage and indirectly on the TV screen. The chorus

clad in dark clothes, singing from the side boxes, only enhances the anti-illusive distance and moralizing framework. When the couple break up, Anne cries out her despair on camera and the reality show acquires a new and heart-breaking flavour. Tom Rakewell, prompted by Nick Shadow, moves up in the world. The tins from the first act are replaced by champagne glasses and the ordinary TV set is replaced by a large plasma TV screen showing a repetitive loop of a celebrity show: the film celebrity Baba Turek receives a film award, gives an effusive speech of thanks and, rolling her eyes, gives an interview. For a flash of a second, the camera pans down from her face to her crotch: a penis is hidden under the diva's robe. Stravinsky's libretto shows that Baba Turek is "different", since she wears a black beard. In this case, just like in the entire production, Kušej opted for a more coarse and targeted means of communication with the experiential world of contemporary audience. In one scene Baba Turek enjoys the attention of journalists, showing off her glamorous beauty. But eventually she can wait no longer and shows her penis to the photographers and the audience. Her urge to be treated as a celebrity means that she loses any possible moral restraint.

Tom finds that neither riches nor the "love" of an attractive woman make him happy. According to his contract with the devil Shadow, he still has one more wish. In terms of the director's interpretation and philosophy, the third wish is both a powerful and dramatic spiritual experience. The plasma TV shows an altruistic old gentleman, looking like a well-fed European, feeding emaciated African children. A film cut shows the same gentleman honoured with the Nobel Peace Prize. A liberating thought pops into Tom's mind: he, too, wants to make the world a better place...The director questions the altruism of Tom's intentions; after all, there is hardly a more impressive way of blending into the world of celebrities than through (the appropriately presented) charity. Money and his marriage to a well-known woman was but a preparatory step to Tom's ultimate fall: the pride that hides behind helping a neighbour. The Bible has long known this ("But when you give alms, let not your left hand know what your right hand does, so that your giving may be in secret", Mt 6, 3-4). Jesus of Nazareth, the top authority, and one of his most famous miracles—the multiplication of the loaves and fish—appear on the TV. The zoom-in of Christ's reproachful eyes follows the removal of the Baba Turek murdered corpse, Tom's wife. Morality *ad absurdum*. Stravinsky's Tom Rakewell spends the remainder of his days in a lunatic asylum, where his loving Anne visits him. In Kušej's production the final catharsis does not take place: Tom is not visited in the asylum by Anne as an Angel of Mercy but rather as a new sweetheart of devilish Shadow, as the latest winner of the Got Talent Show.

The producers of the Vienna production used an epilogue containing a moral message to enhance the effects of the final scene. The method they employed (anti-illusive links between theatre and film) is similar to that used to maintain distance from the plot and at the same time, the audience is involved by using actual references. The opera protagonists perform in costume in the orchestra pit while the audience watches a TV recording of a rehearsal in which the singers sang dressed in their everyday clothes. The singers beam with joy over the well-rendered performance and the audience quickly follows suite. However, there is a second component to the composer's warning: "Since Eve went out with Adam: For idle hands and hearts and minds the Devil finds a work to do". This affects the audience, who are enjoying the joyful and relaxed mood, more profoundly: "...dear Sirs, fair Madam, for you and you".

Even in his next production—Dvořák's *Rusalka* (Bayerische Staatsoper München 2010)—Martin Kušej confirmed his reputation as an ingenious stage producer who, through his daring visions, deals with the most controversial issues of modern society. *Rusalka* was produced in the context of the horrible crime committed by the Austrian, Joseph Fritzl, who kept his own daughter imprisoned for many years in the basement of his home, raping and fathering several children with her. The *Rusalka* production staged in Munich succeeded in building on the emotions that accompanied the highly publicised case.

In the basement of a house in which Vodník (The Water Goblin) and Ježibaba (the Witch) live there is a damp cellar ankle-deep in water and cluttered with junk. There are three young girls and a child (born in incest) kept in it. Rusalka dreams her dream of the Prince. She is slapped in the face by Vodník when she utters her wish to become human. However, the Prince does not bring hope to Rusalka's life; he takes her away on his back like a hunted deer. In the chateau scene visual expressivity builds up and the drama becomes more brutal. The Gamekeeper skins and guts a fake deer, and gossips to the Kitchen Girl about Rusalka who is standing nearby. There appears the provocatively lascivious Foreign Princess, whom Rusalka discovers having sex with the Prince. In the ball scene the ladies sway to the music and stuff themselves with raw deer. Desperate Rusalka, longing to go back to where she came from, gets into an aquarium. For the final scene, everyone is despatched to an asylum; not only the imprisoned girls from the cellar but also the handcuffed Water Goblin.

In Kušej's version *Rusalka* is rendered as an extremely truthful drama of human cruelty and also of the social indifference to it. It is a criticism of the world in which moral values are turned upside down. Brutal visual means are not an end in themselves, designed to attract the audience's attention—they are an emotionally fierce attack on their conscience.

Tranquility Slovak opera theatre

In contrast to theatre performed in German speaking countries, there is nobody producing Slovak opera and no audience that would lend support to "provocative" trends in theatre. In the meaning of the above defined direction and poetic lines, the aestheticizing production trends that dominate in Slovakia correspond to the conservative nature of the Slovak audience. The rare, aggressive attempts to knock the audience out of its comfort zone provoke largely negative reactions on the part of the audience.

Over the past decade, valuable inspiration regarding content and imagery has been introduced into Slovak theatre by international theatre professionals. The Lithuanian stage director Gintaras Varnas based his concept of Gounod's *Faust* (Slovak National Theatre, 2009) on the antagonistic forces of good and evil in man. Faust is not the helpless victim of the manipulative evil embodied by Mephisto; evil is intrinsic to human nature. Among the most powerful scenes in this production is that of Valpurgis night, which was presented by the director as a pivotal moment in the clash between liberating hope and the devil's perdition. In contrast to the usual practice, Varnas did not make the witches' Sabbath a sensual dance piece. Mephisto's Venuses lure Faust into the swimming pool and other bizarre beings dressed in pretend nudity (stuffed bodies with over-emphasised voluptuous curves) get out of open coffins and beckon him from the side wings of a church altar. The witches' Sabbath culminates in a comic orgy of puppet skeletons, having sexual intercourse



Photo 1. Charles Gounod, *Faust*, Opera – Slovak National Theatre 2009, author Ctibor Bachratý.

in a ravishing rhythm of ballet music. The visual coarseness of the grotesque scene hides a deep philosophical message i.e. that the corporeal lust of man is ephemeral—what is essential is the struggle for the salvation of the human soul.

The most notable Slovak opera production in recent years that meets the European theatre criteria is Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* [Orpheus and Eurydice], following the ideas of the acclaimed Polish stage director Mariusz Treliński and his main stage designer, Slovak artist Boris Kudlička (Slovak National Theatre 2008). This was a deeply emotional production dealing with the cathartic process of parting with a beloved one and the inner struggle with recollections and feelings of remorse. While the mythical Eurydice dies of a snake bite, Treliński's Eurydice is poisoned by the snake of her frustration, misapprehension and discontent, which ends in her suicide. Boris Kudlička's set and Magdalena Musiał's costumes clearly convey the idea that the couple come from a well-off background. However, material wealth rarely relates to true human happiness.

During the prelude, the audience witnesses Eurydice's suicidal act. She slashes her veins with a broken wine glass and her bleeding wrist leaves a blood smear on an enormous white wardrobe and blood stains on her beautiful dress. The destruction culminates in her taking a large dose of tranquilizers. In one of the scenes of Gluck's opera Orpheus makes an attempt to convince the Furies to admit him to the Underworld so that he can look for his beloved wife. In Treliński, there is no such thing as Underworld, hell takes place in his head and the Furies are his feelings of remorse: a glazed bathroom full of agitated women's bodies. Eurydice enters, with her wrist bandaged up. When Orpheus attempts to embrace



Photo 2. Ch.W.Gluck, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, Opera – Slovak National Theatre 2008, author Jozef Barinka.

her, she throws herself onto the proscenium and repeats the deadly agony from the prelude. At the very moment the Furies break into the room—they are a true copy of Eurydice. They have identical figures, identical hairdos, identical clothing and in a hysterical and yet, choreographically perfect commotion, they multiply the introductory suicidal act.

In Gluck's opera, Orpheus' peace of mind was eventually restored; however, in Trelinski's production, work serves as therapy. In the final scene, he opens up his laptop and his verses are projected above the audience's heads. Eurydice walks out of the bathroom, strokes the pillows and gets into bed. Almost immediately a circle of fire starts to burn around their marital bed. That is the ultimate end and a moment of absolution: for Orpheus, Eurydice is dead once and for all and the poem is done.

Conclusion

Opera audiences have traditionally been conservative consumers of art. They often respond in heated ways to the current work of contemporary theatre-makers on classical operas that reflects the issues of modern society. Audiences tend to show their displeasure by booing and that is exactly how some members of the first night audiences responded to the majority of the productions dealt with in this article. Despite this, new productions are staged every theatre season, and these express the critical attitudes of the producers towards current political events or towards the moral issues of our time.

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