

Bellowings at Fate & Death:

Wagner, Opera, Stage Directors and the Future

A lecture for the Richard Wagner Society (Victoria)

Greg Eldridge (stage director)

recipient of 2018 Young Artist Award – Bayreuth Scholarship

Flockhart Hall, Melbourne

September 16, 2019



Good evening ladies and gentlemen, and thank you so much for having me.

And a special thank you to Dr Cumming for that handsome introduction, which is far more generous than the one I received recently when invited to a panel at John's College Cambridge to discuss Rossini, where I was introduced as "an Australian who will attempt to explain why directors should be allowed to continue to ruin opera".

And yet, as you may perhaps have gathered by the very broad title of my talk this evening, I may end up doing something very close to that tonight.

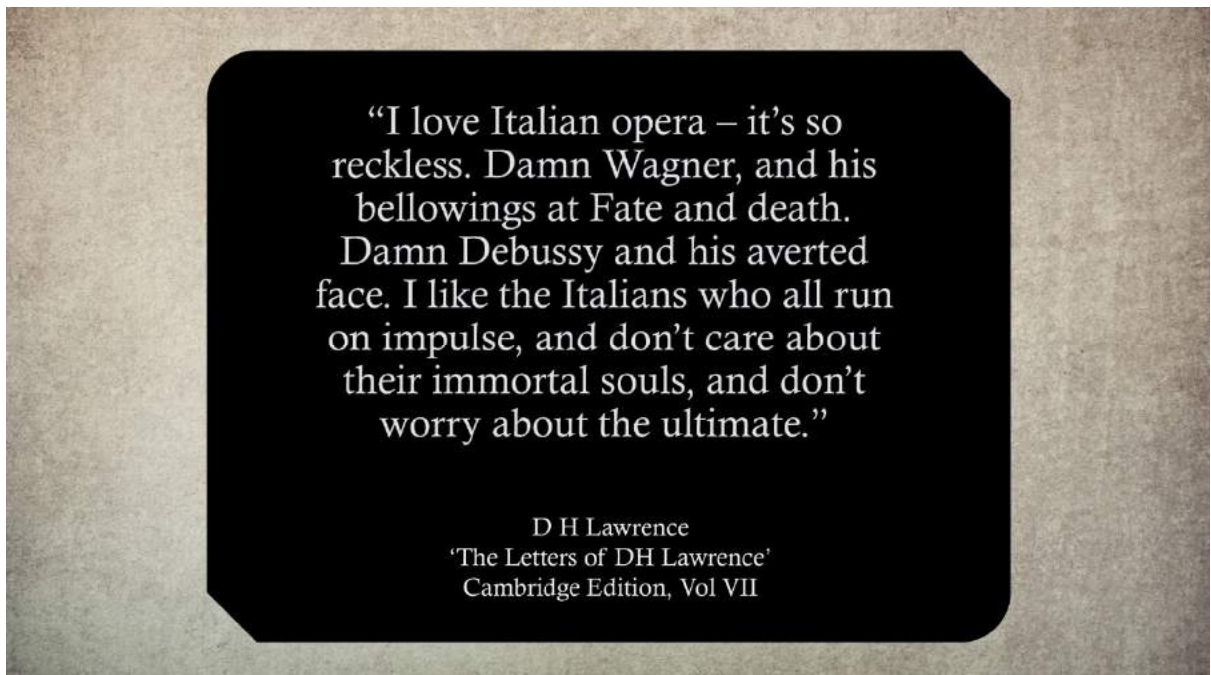
As was outlined, I've been invited here this evening as a result of having been presented with the most enormous opportunity in the shape of an award from the Wagner Society to attend last year's Festspiel in Bayreuth.

I kept a little diary of sorts of my adventures in Bayreuth, which I believe has been published in your newsletter and online, so I won't recover much of that ground except to say that it was the most enormous privilege to attend a festival that I have long dreamed of experiencing first-hand.

I am exceedingly grateful both to the Committee members who have created a mechanism by which this scholarship could be made available, and also to the anonymous donor who through their generosity has gifted this experience to me. Thank you.

So – to this evening's proceedings.

As many of you will have recognised, the title of this little talk is taken from a letter of D H Lawrence written in 1911.



“I love Italian opera – it’s so reckless. Damn Wagner, and his bellowings at Fate and death. Damn Debussy and his averted face. I like the Italians who all run on impulse, and don’t care about their immortal souls, and don’t worry about the ultimate.”

D H Lawrence
‘The Letters of DH Lawrence’
Cambridge Edition, Vol VII

The full quote is: “I love Italian opera - it's so reckless. Damn Wagner, and his bellowings at Fate and death. Damn Debussy, and his averted face. I like the Italians who run all on impulse, and don't care about their immortal souls, and don't worry about the ultimate.”

In fact, there lies in that sentiment the reason that I *love* Wagner – precisely because he *is* so concerned with ideas that transcend the purely human experience that is presented (and occasionally caricatured) by Italian composers like Rossini and Puccini, Leoncavallo and Wolf-Ferrari and others writing in that era.



Clockwise from top-left – Giochino Rossini, Richard Wagner, Giacomo Puccini, Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari, Ruggero Leoncavallo
Source: Wikipedia

For me, the opportunity to examine these deeper philosophical truths and hold them against the lights of many different flames – to look at these higher statements through the kaleidoscope of many different interpretations – is exactly the thrill of a Wagnerian opera and one of the reasons I enjoy going to the theatre to see them.

But, at the same time, for the stage director there is a tremendous weight of responsibility to explore these themes as fully as possible within the scope of one's own experience and life philosophy... and with Wagner raising so many areas of interest to follow in each of his pieces, it can be a daunting task to decide which aspect to focus on, which to throw into relief, which idea to declare the standard-bearer of the production.

With such choice on offer, the director may perhaps wish for a little less bellowing, and a little more concentrated sniping. But we can't have everything, and the freedom to explore Wagner's works as a director is a theme I will touch upon shortly.



The quartet of epithets to my title for tonight is reflective of a number of things; firstly, it gathers together some of those things that I'm most passionate about in a neat tetralogy – a form that is not unknown to Wagnerites.

Secondly, it provides a very attractive way for me to divide my talk tonight into distinct quadrants that will, I hope, both break up the monotony of my delivery and also allow for a more closely-focussed discussion on each of these elements which represent cornerstones of the arts.

Finally, I hope that structuring my remarks in this way will allow you in the audience space to react to these inextricably-linked subjects separately as well as when they are joined in an overall manner.

I should say from the outset that, to borrow a phrase from Christopher Hitchens, I think that 'people of this sort of interest and intellect often come to events such as these in order to be heard, as well as to listen', and so it is my firm desire to make provocative statements, to challenge and be challenged in turn, and I hope to dedicate a large portion of this evening to engaging with questions from the floor.

I promise you that if I was able to withstand the heat from that Rossini conference in Cambridge, I have no fear of the well-mannered Wagnerites of Melbourne!

I should say, incidentally, that one of my interlocutors in Cambridge opened his question with a sharply-worded desire to know why stage directors were necessary at all, and why the singers couldn't simply be left in peace to arrange their own movements about the stage. While I'm certainly happy to repeat my reply should I be asked again tonight, I'll endeavour to address some of the less *ad hominem* aspects of that question later on.

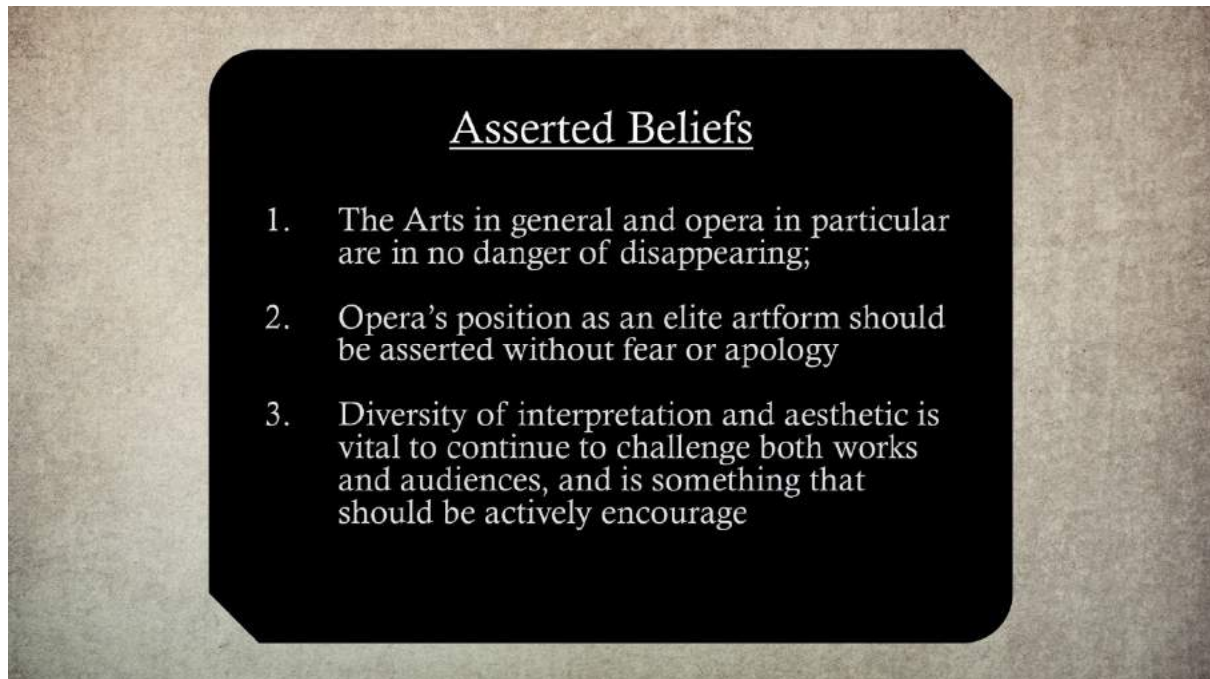
As a final note of prologue, then, I wanted to outline the main thoughts that I'll be seeking to address in my speech this evening.

Main Contentions

- a diversity of interpreting voices is vital;
- Wagner especially benefits from a plurality of approaches;
- there needs to be dedicated training opportunities for stage directors; and
- the future of the artform's artistic standards depends on investing in emerging directors

- that a diversity of interpreting voices is vital for the continued exploration and interrogation of artistic works;
- that Wagner especially benefits from a plurality of approaches to the underpinning philosophies that serve as the foundation for the literal narratives;
- that in order to achieve the requisite quality of artistic output that there needs to be dedicated training and developmental opportunities for the stage directors who will be responsible for leading the new generation of productions; and
- that the future of the artform is dependent upon investing in young and emerging directors in order to safeguard artistic standards moving forward

Further, by way of assertion now in case I don't have time to fully address them later on tonight, I should make clear that I also hold the following beliefs, which will form a consistent supporting theme throughout my address this evening:



1. that contrary to common - and disappointingly un-refuted - belief, the arts in general and opera in particular are in no danger of disappearing from our social landscape and, in fact, are growing in popularity among new audiences;
2. that It is the responsibility and duty of those of us involved in the arts whether as practitioners or as patrons to reassert opera's position as an elite artform without fear or apology;
3. that an increased diversity of views, interpretations and aesthetics are vital for the great works – especially those of Wagner – to continue to challenge and confound us ... and that such challenge and confounding is not only a by-product of the artistic process but is, in fact, the end product to most aspire to.

I thought I should perhaps begin my remarks with a brief biography of my work, not just in the interests of my own ego, but so that I might better provide you with the basis for my world view and the experiences that lead me to create and interpret works as I do.



Brief Biography

Born in Melbourne, Australia

Attended St Leonard's College, Brighton –ENTER score of 98.5

Enrolled in Bachelor of Performing Arts / Bachelor of Laws at Monash University

Discontinued study to attend The Opera Studio Melbourne

Studied at Accademia Europea di Firenze in Florence, Italy

Young Artist Director at The Royal Opera, Covent Garden

Jette Parker Associate Director at the Royal Opera, Covent Garden

Board Member – Stage Directors UK

Photograph – Royal Opera House

The son of two teachers with no performers in either family, I grew up in the South-Eastern suburbs of Melbourne and attended secondary school on scholarship at a private school in Brighton.

It was there that I first really learned about performed text, and the power of language.

I had always been an avid reader, and as with most lovers of language, it was my first tentative steps into Shakespeare that led me to discovering the world of dramatic possibility.

I was unsure what to pursue at university – I had ignored the advice of my academic counsellor and had elected to study all humanities subjects firm in the belief that my love of language would see me through – and so I knew that my greatest loves were twofold – legalistic and performative.

For reasons more of philosophy than practicality, I had always been fascinated by the creation and enforcement of legislative instruments – the question of how the State gains, guards and maintains the right to morally value and devalue human actions had been a favourite mind-wrestle of mine ever since I'd read Hugo and Wilde and Dumas.

On the other side of the ledger, the fire that had been ignited in me by the dramatic texts of Moliere and Beaumarchais and the poetry of Whitman, Wilde again and Wordsworth was too fierce to ignore.

I eventually elected to accept an offer from Monash University that was the only institution in Australia that would allow me to study these two subjects concurrently, and so I enrolled in a double-degree of Performing Arts and Law.

This seems a common double-interest for many performers, writers, and comedians – perhaps the ironic association between the two and the strained relationship between parody, satire and authority appeals to a certain kind of person.

Certainly, this duality brought with it certain surreal experiences – one of my favourite stories from this time centred around one particular Thursday, where I spent 3 hours in the morning in a lecture theatre being told about the application of constitutional interpretation in relation to international contracts and treaties, and then 3 hours in the afternoon in a rehearsal room being a tree.

It was a happy double-act for a while but, as time went on, the power of performance to evoke change in real people in real time became more interesting to me than the long-game of legislative process and its myriad corruptions.

After writing and performing and directing more shows than my academic demands should have allowed, I was asked by an opera director to assist him on a show here in Melbourne, and that was the catalyst I needed to realise that if the world of theatre was to be my home, I needed a grounding in its realities rather than in its theoretical potentials.

I joined the Opera Studio Melbourne as its young artist stage director, and worked closely there with both its guest directors and its resident director Cameron Menzies.

Having been an avid reader of Beaumarchais, now suddenly I was exposed to music that had been written in response to his words, and it wasn't hard to fall in love with the musical sensitivities of Rossini and Mozart.

From there, I learned more and more and decided that I needed to study in Italy in order to further my education in opera as an art form and, following that, I relocated to the UK in order to experience their forms of theatre.

I picked the UK because, as I reasoned, they were a midway-point between the dichotomy of European theatre – either absurdly experimental or ingrainedly traditional – and the American schools of Stanislavski, Adler and Strasberg.

From there, I was taken on as a Young Artist at Covent Garden – the first Australian director to be so, and the youngest director ever to be appointed – and was further granted the honour of the position of Associate Director being created for me in 2015.

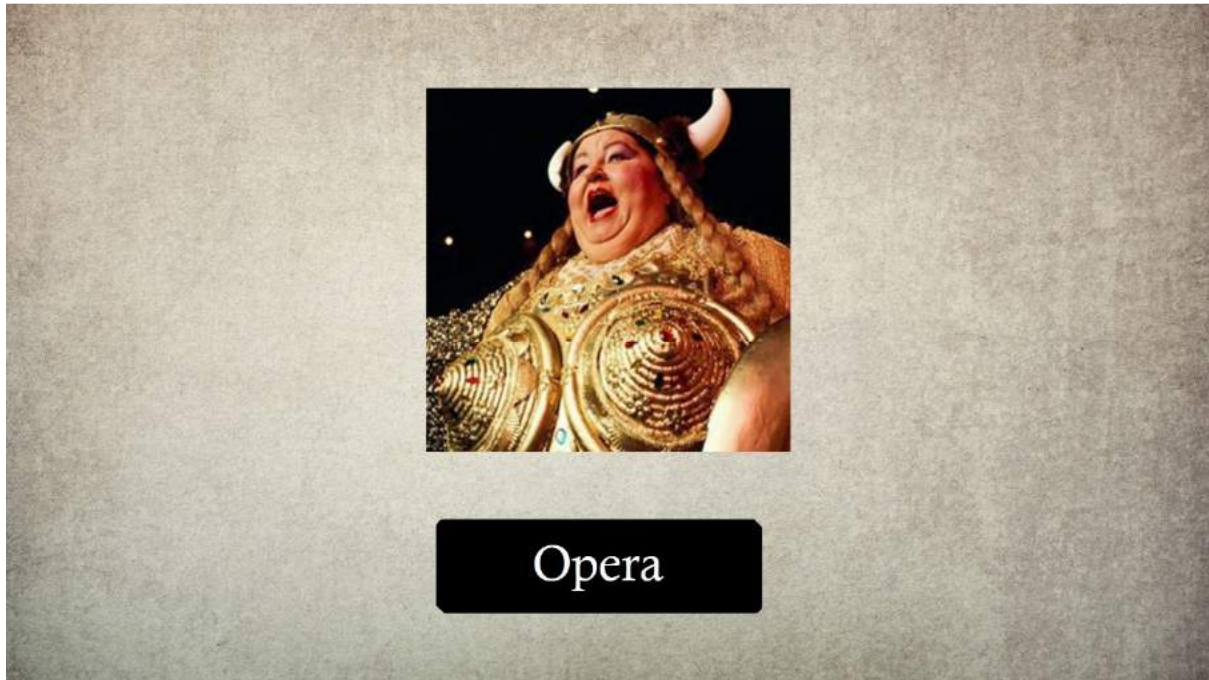
I have since worked around the world on 60 productions in 8 countries and have worked with a number of leading singers, directors and conductors, several of whom I'll mention later on this evening.

I should also mention that I am a board member of Stage Directors UK – the industry body that represents the interests of directors of live theatre throughout England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

I have been a member of this organisation for 3 years now, and have served on its board for a little over 12 months as a specialist advocate for the interests of emerging directors and for directors working in the field of music-based theatre.

As a part of this role, I have been a liaison between members and theatres on several issues and have been proud to have supported initiatives aimed at increasing access, support and opportunity for directors throughout the operatic landscape.

This particular area is one of the reasons I am so proud to stand before you tonight as the recipient of an award designed to support emerging artists, and is another reason I am proud that the Australian arts community – and the Wagner Society in particular – are leading the way in creating significant and meaningful opportunities for the next generation of theatre-makers.



The world of professional opera-goers, as you may know, often appears to be a twin-beast of traditionalists and progressives.



(L) – Jonas Kaufmann as Andrea Chénier, *Andrea Chénier*, Royal Opera Covent Garden
Director: Sir David McVicar, Costume: Jenny Tiramani, Set: Robert Jones, Lights: Adam Silverman, Photo: Bill Cooper

(R) – Christine Rice as Jenny, *Rise & Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, Royal Opera Covent Garden
Director: John Fulljames, Costume: Christina Cunningham, Set: Es Devlin, Lights: Bruno Poet, Photo: Clive Barda

On the one hand there are those who argue passionately for what they believe to be the ‘truth’ of operatic performance – that stage directions should be clinically observed, that the composer’s wishes should be respected above all else, that any attempt to meddle in any way with the product as it was created originally should be treated with at best derision and at worst hostile contempt.

In the other polar extremity exist the radical modernists who find even the suggestion of a period costume to be an indicator of the bourgeoisie roots of the artform and therefore something to be actively ranged against lest the universality of the messages contained in the pieces be swallowed by empty aestheticism.

For me, as someone who came late to an appreciation of opera but who found within its myriad texts and notes the philosophical music of humanity, I have sympathy with both views.

My background in prose theatre had led me to expect that each conceptual choice was a deliberate one, and that it was up to me as a member of an audience to decipher these messages, symbols and clues as best I could based on my knowledge of the piece and my life experience in approaching the work.



(L) – Kate Lindsey as Cherubino, (R) Stéphane Degout as Count Almaviva, *Le nozze di Figaro*, Royal Opera Covent Garden
Director: Sir David McVicar, Design: Tanya McCallin, Lights: Paule Constable, Photo: Bill Cooper

After all, if as a young man I was identifying strongly with Cherubino, it was unlikely that I could appreciate the actions of the Count with anywhere near the level of nuance that I would now approach that character with as I draw closer to his age.

If I was unable to completely decipher all of the symbols used in a production, I reasoned, then the fault lay with me and my understanding of the piece, and not with the creative team who were trying to make an interpretative point that presupposed some knowledge of the work.

I should take this opportunity to introduce some of my own work to outline my own predispositions when it comes to aesthetics.



The Lighthouse, Royal Opera Covent Garden
Director: Greg Eldridge, Design: Alyson Cummins, Lights: Warren Letton, Photo: Clive Barda

My work is often reviewed as being 'clean' ...



La scala di seta, Royal Opera Covent Garden
Director: Greg Eldridge, Design: Holly Piggot, Lights: Warren Letton, Photo: Catherine Ashmore

... or 'classic' ...



Tosca, The Icelandic Opera
Director: Greg Eldridge, Design: Alyson Cummins, Lights: Þórður Orri Pétursson, Photo: Íslenska óperan

or 'elegant', and these are certainly descriptors that I feel proud of.



The Ghost Sonata, Opera Australia

Director: Greg Eldridge, Design: Emma Kingsbury, Lights: John Rayment, Photo: Prudence Upton

I most enjoy creating aesthetic worlds with an artistic quality and then encouraging the performers to engage with those worlds in a manner that both allows them to make their individual emotional arcs read clearly, and also highlights their symbolic role as a representation of another, bigger concept.

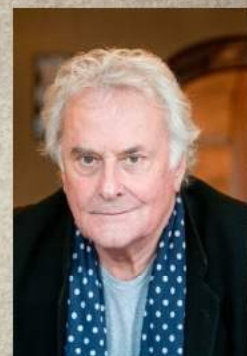
I also tend to work with directors who share a similar outlook on the purpose of theatrical aesthetics.



John Copley



Sir David McVicar



Sir Richard Eyre

Whether it be Sir David McVicar (with whom I've worked on shows in London, Glyndebourne and Norway), or John Copley (who has been a mentor and friend since I arrived in the UK, and to whom opera in Australia owes the most enormous debt of gratitude), or Sir Richard Eyre (whose production of Traviata I have now worked on three times), these are directors who possess an extremely detailed knowledge of the text and of the way the music relates to it, and who work with designers to create worlds that allow an expression of both the narrative and its symbolic meaning through naturalistic movement with symbolic overtones.

Having said that, my work has also been influenced by directors who occupy the other end of the aesthetic spectrum.



People like Kasper Holten (formerly in charge at Covent Garden and whose productions I have revived in London and Tel Aviv), Christof Loy (who remains for me one of the true champions of the regietheater movement), and David Bösch (whose work I originally worked on in London and have since revived in Germany).

And not only do I think both aesthetics are valid, I think both are necessary.

For me, the great joy of opera is that its limited canon of regularly-performed repertoire provides excellent opportunity to see the same works – sometimes with the same performers – in completely different interpretations.



(L) Sir Robert Helpmann as the Mad Hatter, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1972), Josef Shafteel Productions
(R) Johnny Depp as the Mad Hatter, *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), Walt Disney Pictures

I could liken it to the magical fact that every generation since film was invented has had its own production of *Alice in Wonderland*, featuring the stars of that day.

Robert Helpmann's interpretation of the Mad Hatter is as different to Johnny Depp's ...



Lucia di Lammermoor, The Royal Opera Covent Garden (2016)
Director: Katie Mitchell, Design: Vicki Mortimer, Lights: Jon Clarke, Photo: Stephen Cummiskey

... as Katie Mitchell's interpretation of Lucia di Lammermoor ...



Lucia di Lammermoor, The Royal Opera Covent Garden (1959)
Director & Design: Franco Zeffirelli, Photo: Royal Opera House

... is to Franco Zeffirelli's, but they each have an enormous value not just in and of themselves, but as a means of allowing an audience to reflect on the central work and its resonant meaning in their own hearts and minds.

If we can accept that the arts should make us both feel and think (although the desired proportion of each seems fluid between different markets, countries and cultural backgrounds), then opera is in the prime position to perform both of these duties, armed as it is with – generally speaking – texts that contain both literal and metaphorical meaning, and music that has been designed to evoke an emotional response, either in and of itself or in combination with the human voice.

For that reason, to my mind, there is a need for ever more interpretations of existing works, with differing viewpoints offering an opportunity to bring a different light to bear on the subject matter of the pieces.

Especially as we increase our cultural literacy, and audiences become more familiarised with the works being performed, we have more capacity to invigilate the conceptual truths of these mighty works by isolating one character or concept or thematic idea and shining a light on it.

When everyone knows the story and what is going to happen, we can afford to be slightly less literal in our retelling of that story and to take more opportunities to show an *interpretation* of that story. It is in this way that we gain greater understanding of pieces – and by extension of our own relationship both to the Art and to each other – and that we can highlight ever more the genius of the original creators of these works.

It is often said that a director would rather have a bi-polarity of 5-star and 1-star reviews than receive a stamp of mediocrity through unanimous 3-star critiques, and I can see the truth hiding behind that shiver-inducing statement: the bolder the choice and the brasher the attempt to investigate beyond the literal narrative of the piece, the more polarised audience reaction seems to become.

Yet, for me, it is *precisely* the different viewpoints taken in the execution of the piece that I find most rewarding as an audience member, especially in a piece that I know well.



To give a concrete example, I have now worked on 3 different productions of Don Giovanni – one by Cameron Menzies at the National Theatre in St Kilda, one by Francesca Zambello at The Royal Opera Covent Garden, and one by Kasper Holten, both in London and for The Israeli Opera in Tel Aviv.

Each of these interpretations was very different aesthetically and in terms of budget and resources, and each presented a different means of conveying the same basic narrative by shifting the lens of focus onto different characters and the consequences of their actions.

For Cameron Menzies, the world of Don Giovanni was represented in a ghostly whiteness ...



Cameron Lukey as Don Giovanni, *Don Giovanni*, The Opera Studio Melbourne
Director: Cameron Menzies, Photo: The Opera Studio Melbourne

... his conquests bore the mark of their seduction by wearing an oversized version of his shirt ...



(L) Cameron Lukey as Don Giovanni, (R) Cameron Lukey & Stacey Alleaume as Zerlina
- *Don Giovanni*, The Opera Studio Melbourne, Director: Cameron Menzies, Photo: The Opera Studio Melbourne

... his final supper was stylistically represented by virtue of an all-white inedible banquet ...



(L) Cameron Lukey as Don Giovanni, (TR) Cameron Lukey & Stephen Gallop as Commedndatore & Nick Dinopoulous as Leporello, (BR) Nathan Lay as Masetto & chorus of The Opera Studio Melbourne - *Don Giovanni*, The Opera Studio Melbourne, Director: Cameron Menzies, Photo: The Opera Studio Melbourne

... and the only colour came from the other characters who entered his monochromatic existence.

Turning to Francesca Zambello's take ...



Erwin Schrott as Don Giovanni, *Don Giovanni*, The Royal Opera Covent Garden
 Director: Cameron Menzies, Design: Maria Björnson, Lights: Paul Pyant, Photo: Clive Barda

... which was the first show I ever worked on at The Royal Opera, one might be forgiven for thinking this was a traditionalists dream – costumes placing people vaguely in period, the funny bits played for laughs ...



Kate Lindsey as Zerlina & Matthew Rose as Masetto, *Don Giovanni*, The Royal Opera Covent Garden
Director: Cameron Menzies, Design: Maria Björnson, Lights: Paul Pyant, Photo: Clive Barda

... the simple set of moving trucks allowing seamless transition between scenes and, of course ...



Erwin Schrott as Don Giovanni, Reinhard Hagen as Commendatore - *Don Giovanni*, The Royal Opera Covent Garden
Director: Cameron Menzies, Design: Maria Björnson, Lights: Paul Pyant, Photo: Clive Barda

... the fiery end of the Dissoluto himself as he's taken to his fate.

Of course, what you don't see here is the straight-forwardness of the delivery of the narrative ... a production played so literally that Erwin Schrott singing Giovanni became so bored one night that he left the stage completely and delivered some recitative to a member of the audience sitting in a box that he could access from the stage.

We're also spared in these photographs the hideous sound of the fire extinguishers that were required to extinguish the flames behind a drop curtain while the rest of the cast tried valiantly to perform the scena ultima in front of it.

Finally, Kasper Holten's *Don Giovanni* ...



Don Giovanni, The Royal Opera Covent Garden

Director: Kasper Holten, Costume: Anja Vang Kragh, Set: Es Devlin, Video: Luke Halls, Lights: Bruno Poet, Photo: Clive Barda

A single set – a double-storey house on a revolve with doors and walls constantly moving ...



Dorethea Roschmann as Donna Elvira & Christopher Maltman as Don Giovanni & Alex Esposito as Leporello - *Don Giovanni*, The Royal Opera Covent Garden
Director: Kasper Holten, Costume: Anja Vang Kragh, Set: Es Devlin, Video: Luke Halls, Lights: Bruno Poet, Photo: Clive Barda

... pushed by a team of actresses dressed as ghosts who had to rehearse for weeks to be able to elegantly glide heavy wooden panels into position and hit marks on the floor in the dark without looking down so that the next scene would have its doorways aligned.

An interpretation where Donna Anna is a willing participant in her interactions with Giovanni ...



Don Giovanni, The Royal Opera Covent Garden
Director: Kasper Holten, Costume: Anja Vang Kragh, Set: Es Devlin, Video: Luke Halls, Lights: Bruno Poet, Photo: Clive Barda

... lies to Don Ottavio about it all and then cuckolds her partner as she secretly goes to see Giovanni again while Ottavio impotently sings his Act One aria *Dalla sua pace*.

Instead of the fiery descent into the bowels of damnation, Holten's Giovanni experiences his own version of Hell by being left alone.



Christopher Maltman as Don Giovanni - *Don Giovanni*, The Royal Opera Covent Garden
Director: Kasper Holten, Costume: Anja Vang Kragh, Set: Es Devlin, Video: Luke Halls, Lights: Bruno Poet, Photo: Clive Barda

No longer able to manipulate or interact with anyone, he is abandoned against the plain white walls of his house with one last desperate plea to the audience for consolation.

None of these ideas matched with my own vision of the opera ... but they were all the more exciting for that.

That is not to say that I didn't have very specific ideas about what the piece could look like - when I first listened to a recording of the opera, I had a very particular picture in my head.

Indeed, when I first listened to the opera, I was studying in Florence and determined to have the opera play through my headphones as I wandered through the Uffizi gallery, wondering at the marvels of the Medici ... certainly a very exotic atmosphere in which to meet Leporello and Donna Anna for the first time.

But through experiencing what someone else made of a piece that I hold very close to my heart, I was able to refine my understanding of the work, and also appreciate areas of difference – or even argument – that I had with the interpretation of either the text or the music.

And it is in that spirit of genuinely desiring to experience something different each time I encounter a piece that I make my first claim for a need for a diversification of voices in the interpretation of works.

I do not believe that there is only one way to stage an opera.

Just as I do not believe that there is any one way for a singer to interpret a role, or for a pianist to interpret a piano concerto, or for a reader to interpret a book.

And that for me is the joy of interpretation – that the greatest works of art are able to stand up to any level of analysis and interrogation and still be as appealing to the newcomer as to the expert.

And perhaps it is there that I slightly disagree with some of my colleagues when it comes to aesthetics – I think that the theatrical firmament is robust enough to encompass both productions that are more literal and narrative-driven *and* those that are more conceptual and ideas-driven.

The idea of Claus Guth's Bohème set on a spaceship near the moon, for example ...



La Bohème, Opéra National de Paris

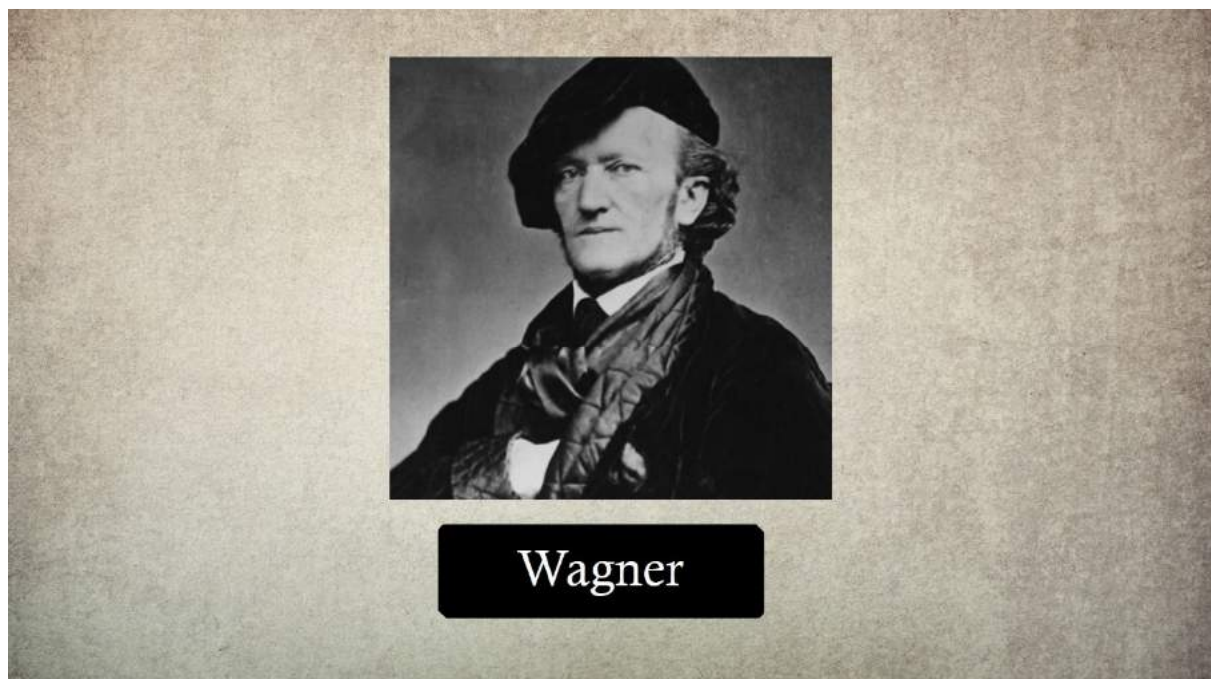
Director: Claus Guth, Costume: Eva Dessecker, Set: Étienne Pluss, Video: Arian Andiel, Lights: Fabrice Kebour, Photo: ONdP

... doesn't immediately make me cringe – on the contrary, it makes me interested to see how the conceit adds to the story, what aspects of the narrative or its underlying thematic foundations it might expose in its new location.

My artistic concern would be that if I were to balk at seeing a production purely on the basis that it didn't fit my preconceived idea of what the piece should look like, then perhaps I would be missing out on a nugget of interpretation that might increase my appreciation of the piece itself.

In other words, I have enough interest in these works themselves to want to see what would drive a director of significant experience and reputation to meddle with its setting so drastically – and perhaps because I am more interested in going to the opera to absorb someone else’s interpretation rather than dwell in memories of another production or my own imagined stagings, I am also by extension desperate for more voices and more opinions and more points of view to be forthcoming to expand my knowledge and appreciation and love of the piece under discussion.

Of course, the key proviso must be that the work done is Good Work, and that concepts are able to be carried through and ideas explored, rather than just being presented as part of an ignorant attempt to subvert. And nowhere is this more important than in addressing the works of Wagner.



I have been fortunate in my career so far to have had Wagnerian works as constant companions on my journey through the professional world.

And, drawing on this experience, it is my belief that the works of Wagner especially benefit from a plurality of approaches to the underpinning philosophies that serve as the foundation for his literal narratives.

As you all know, the great works of Art – be it Shakespeare or Wilde or Wagner – are much more than the often-straightforward story that makes up their plots.

To view *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for example, as a story about a magic painting is to miss the point as completely as to look at *The Flying Dutchman* as a tale of naval ghosts.

The essential nature of the Wagnerian operas is rooted in a philosophical exploration of high-level conceptual ideas – the issue facing a stage director in tackling any of these works is which of these concepts is the most worthy for exploration in the current production.

As I mentioned briefly earlier, I work regularly with legendary director Sir David McVicar throughout the UK and Europe, and one of his many anecdotes relates to his 2013 production of *Tristan und Isolde* at the Wiener Staatsoper.



Sophie Koch as Brangäne - *Tristan und Isolde*, Wiener Staatsoper
Director: Sir David McVicar, Design: Robert Jones, Lights: Paule Constable, Photo: Wiener Staatsoper

Singing Isolde was that most giving of sopranos and most generous of colleagues, Nina Stemme.

As Sir David recounts, Stemme - a veteran of several Isolde's by that time – approached him at one point in rehearsal as he had asked her to move more to the aft end of the ship and asked politely which end that was, as in her career to date she had never actually been on board the ship described in the stage directions as the location for Act 1.



Nina Stemme as Isolde & Stephen Gould as Tristan - *Tristan und Isolde*, Wiener Staatsoper
Director: Sir David McVicar, Design: Robert Jones, Lights: Paule Constable, Photo: Wiener Staatsoper

Sir David's incredulous reaction matches with his stated desire to be as true to the indications of the score as is possible while maintaining artistic freedom of expression.

His production was regarded as a prime example of clear storytelling in which the narrative was given precedence over interpretation and, as such, was a perfect first-time Tristan for anyone new to the opera.

Conversely, when I worked with Nina Stemme on the Covent Garden production of *Tristan und Isolde*, we were in much less naturalistic territory.



Nina Stemme as Isolde - *Tristan und Isolde*, The Royal Opera Covent Garden
Director: Christof Loy, Design: Johannes Leiacker, Lights: Olaf Winter, Photo: Clive Barda

The director in this case was Christof Loy – one of the most awarded directors of his generation, and a renowned exponent of concept-driven productions that avoid sentimentality in favour of exploring the issues of existentialism that flow throughout this particular opera.



Nina Stemme as Isolde & Iain Paterson as Kurwenal & Dame Sarah Connolly as Brangäne - *Tristan und Isolde*, The Royal Opera Covent Garden, Director: Christof Loy, Design: Johannes Leiacker, Lights: Olaf Winter, Photo: Clive Barda

Gone was the ship, and instead we spent the entirety of Loy's *Tristan* in one room, with a moving wall at the rear of the stage revealing a dinner party that gradually descended into a slow-motion fight between the guests over the course of Act 3 until all the actors lay fallen across the stage.



Sir John Tomlinson as König Marke & Iain Paterson as Kurwenal - *Tristan und Isolde*, The Royal Opera Covent Garden
Director: Christof Loy, Design: Johannes Leiacker, Lights: Olaf Winter, Photo: Clive Barda

As a symbolic representation of the inner torment that consumed first Tristan, then Marke and finally spilled over into the destruction of all human solidarity in the face of betrayal of duty and self, it was a fascinating exercise and something that made me really appreciate this particular aspect of the opera's DNA.



Nina Stemme as Isolde & Sir John Tomlinson as König Marke - *Tristan und Isolde*, The Royal Opera Covent Garden
Director: Christof Loy, Design: Johannes Leiacker, Lights: Olaf Winter, Photo: Clive Barda

As a first-time entry to the opera, however, it would have appeared a disjointed and confusing effort, with the non-naturalistic elements obscuring the flow of the story to the point of making it difficult to understand the narrative without prior knowledge of what was going on.

Yet, when faced with these two starkly different productions, I find them both so compelling in their different approaches that I would see either again without hesitation.

Any opportunity to further my understanding of the nuances of the work are advantageous to me, not only as a director, but as a lover of the artform.

Armed with an understanding of the narrative borne of my own research and Sir David's production in Vienna, I am in a much better position to engage with the nuanced staging and micro-details of Christof Loy's Covent Garden production.

And opera audiences deserve the opportunity to experience both – for both the newcomers and the aficionados to have access to works that are appropriately gauged to their level of interest and knowledge of the works.

The ease with which this can be achieved in Europe and America is of course due to its relative size, operatic tradition and the sheer number of theatres that play regular host to Wagnerian operas.

The market in Australia is obviously and demonstrably different – something I will address later on – but my view is that while this necessarily makes for a more conservative audience for those works which are not regularly performed, it shouldn't rob us of the opportunity to experience a multiplicity of views on what these works mean.

Another example in macro form can be found in the two Ring Cycles that I've worked on ...



(L) Rachel Nicholls as Brünnhilde – *Die Walküre*, Longborough Festival Opera
(R) Stefan Vinke as Siegfried & Lise Lindtrom as Brünnhilde – *Siegfried* – Opera Australia

... the 2013 Longborough Ring and the 2016 Melbourne Ring.

There are clear differences in the foundational frameworks for each Cycle...



source: <https://lfo.org.uk/>

... Longborough is an English summer opera Festival almost entirely privately-funded by the owner of the mansion and grounds in which the theatre has been built.

It specialises in Wagnerian repertoire, drawing from a large number of very interested and, perhaps more importantly, very proximate potential audience members.

It engages specialist artists on a freelance basis, and has relative artistic freedom in that the only KPIs it has to meet are the satisfaction levels of the owner and his wife.

The Melbourne Ring, in contrast, was mounted by Opera Australia ...



source: <https://opera.org.au>

... a company in receipt of much public money, and with a regular roster of salaried artists – that was operating in a market that had seen only one other production of the Ring in living memory.

The differences in approach between the two productions were also marked.



Longborough's director Alan Privet was a relatively unknown director, having a personal association with the owners of the festival that extended back to annual trips to Bayreuth to observe, analyse and comment upon several years' worth of productions in Wagner's own theatre.

Neil Armfield, by contrast, is one of Australia's most well-known theatre directors and was quite open about never having seen a full Ring Cycle before embarking on his own production.

The budgets were different, the audience expectations were different, and the allegories employed were different.



Jason Howard as Wotan – *Das Rheingold*, Longborough Festival Opera
Director: Alan Privett, Design: Kjell Tørriset, Lights: Ben Ormerod, Photo: John Alexander

The Longborough Ring was interested in highlighting the chamber-opera intimacy of the Ring – a focus on familial tension was the cornerstone of this interpretation,



Richard Roberts as Mime – *Das Rheingold*, Longborough Festival Opera
Director: Alan Privett, Design: Kjell Tørriset, Lights: Ben Ormerod, Photo: John Alexander

with Wotan's role as largely impotent figurehead to his extended family of Gods highlighted by virtue of the disdain with which he was treated by wife Fricka and, at times, daughter Brünnhilde.



Jason Howard as Wotan – *Die Walküre*, Longborough Festival Opera
Director: Alan Privett, Design: Kjell Tørriset, Lights: Ben Ormerod, Photo: John Alexander

His journey through the opera was one of almost world-weary inevitability – a desperate patriarch attempting to hold together a rabble of relatives he knew would overturn his legacy whenever they had the opportunity.



Hugo Mallet as Siegfried – *Siegfried*, Longborough Festival Opera
Director: Alan Privett, Design: Kjell Torriset, Lights: Ben Ormerod, Photo: John Alexander

This King Lear interpretation of Wotan was coupled with an insistence on Siegfried as an anti-hero, a childish, vindictive and petty-minded man-child who's own destruction was as assured as the collapse of Wotan's house of cards when the two met in Siegfried's eponymous instalment.



Rachel Nicholls as Brünnhilde – *Götterdämmerung*, Longborough Festival Opera
Director: Alan Privett, Design: Kjell Torriset, Lights: Ben Ormerod, Photo: John Alexander

Brünnhilde, then, was a victim of the unsuitability of the men who surrounded her.

Betrayed by an impotent father, rescued by an incapable hero, deceived by an immoral agent of vengeance – her destruction of the world was as much an act of revenge as it was purification.



Das Rheingold, Opera Australia

Director: Neil Armfield, Costume: Alice Babidge, Set: Robert Cousins, Lights: Damien Cooper, Photo: Jeff Busby

The Melbourne Ring, on the other hand, was concerned chiefly with placing the action ‘nowhere other than the stage’.

Its most memorable aesthetic moments were hugely theatrical in their statement-making.



Warwick Fyfe as Alberich - *Das Rheingold*, Opera Australia
Director: Neil Armfield, Costume: Alice Babidge, Set: Robert Cousins, Lights: Damien Cooper, Photo: Jeff Busby

A clear focus in *Rheingold* on the parallel between Alberich's renunciation of love and humanity's drift towards abusing the earth's natural resources were highlighted in large chorus scenes that made way for knowing references to the theatrical world.



Siegfried, Opera Australia
Director: Neil Armfield, Costume: Alice Babidge, Set: Robert Cousins, Lights: Damien Cooper, Photo: Jeff Busby

Proscenium arches on revolves, large theatre drapes and overt references to vaudeville and cabaret were imbedded in the production and provided a constant reference to the fact that the audience were watching a show, engaging in a parable, participating in a metaphor.

Here, the large scale of the State Theatre stage precluded the kind of intimate stage pictures that could be achieved in Longborough, and so large-scale statements were made – perhaps none more interesting to me than the plastic wedding marquee set for the doomed wedding between Gunther and Brunnhilde in *Götterdämmerung*.



Daniel Sumegi as Hagen – *Götterdämmerung*, Opera Australia
Director: Neil Armfield, Costume: Alice Babidge, Set: Robert Cousins, Lights: Damien Cooper, Photo: Jeff Busby

How far we'd come from the rolling natural world of the Rhein – here we had plastic enclosures to house our plastic people and the sense of mediocre consumerism they represented.

Again, faced with these two very different interpretations, I am unable to declare either of them a more interesting or a more compelling vision of the story.

While one production may have had moments that were, in themselves, more artistic or more thought-provoking than those in the other, the difference in selection of the major themes to focus on was so great as to make comparison impossible.

The freedoms afforded to the stage directors and their creative teams to engage with the piece in the ways that mattered most to them allowed each production to carry its own interpretive narrative, to shine a light on its own chosen themes.

And this freedom allows us to experience works in new ways, including in ways which may challenge our own ideas of what these pieces can mean.

And the only way to continue to allow these pieces to evolve and to speak with new meaning to the audiences that seek them out is through enabling the next generation of theatre-makers to gain the experience and knowledge that they need in order to contribute meaningfully to the artistic conversation.



Directors

Photograph of the Staff Directors' Department of The Royal Opera Covent Garden

And so to my own personal area of experience – the stage director.

Before I moved to the UK in 2011, I wrote to every major opera company in the English-speaking world begging them to introduce a Young Artist Programme for directors.

‘There exist many opportunities for passionate singers, pianists and conductors,’ I wrote, ‘please can you consider helping those who, like myself, are keen to expand our knowledge and experience but cannot because there exists no program to cater for us’.

I had a response rate in the low single digits. Almost all the replies were variants of the same thing – ‘Thank you for your email but we don’t have any plans to work with young directors at the moment.’

It is one thing to be rejected from a training programme that you really want to get into; it’s another to find that no-one values your profession enough to offer a programme to begin with.

Despondent, I called an informal gathering of colleagues and friends to discuss it and found that the others were in the same position.

One fellow director told me he’d approached a national company he’d assisted at and offered to raise the money himself if they’d let him spend the season as an observer/assistant to continue his on-the-job training. The response? ‘Thank you for your proposal but we don’t have any plans to work with young directors at the moment.’

We couldn’t work it out – after all, we were keen, we had a few shows under our belts and we had a real interest in working in an artform that people were always saying needed to appeal to younger audiences.

Every show needs a director as much as it needs singers – why weren't companies interested in shaping the next generation of opera makers as well as opera performers?

A depressing thought crept in - perhaps being a young director wasn't as glamorous as being a young singer.

After all, a thought-provoking discussion of aesthetics or contemporary approaches to storytelling at the annual fundraiser wouldn't hit the sponsors with quite the same impact as wheeling out a young soprano in a ballgown to sing yet another rendition of '*O mio babbino caro*'.

Worse still, there came the thought that the undervaluation of directors in opera might be because of an existential paradox – no-one seems to know what an opera director actually does, while simultaneously believing that anyone can do it.

I'm fortunate that through my work I get the opportunity to talk to groups of actors, directors and the general public through masterclasses and workshops.

I've worked in 7 countries now, and whenever I'm engaged to work on a production, I reach out to local institutions in case I can give a talk or work with students who share my enthusiasm for music-based theatre.

As with this evening, I always ask to allow time for a Q&A segment in order to answer any questions that arise from the workshops.

By far the most common question I'm asked is: 'So, what does a director actually do?'

People seem quite happy to accept the concept of a director for a play or a film (the director is the one in charge).

But with opera, isn't the person waving the stick in charge?

After all, everyone knows the image of the conductor in bow-tie and tails holding a baton, but who can describe the archetypal opera director?

Conversely, there seems a common belief that anyone can throw together the staging of an opera – So long as most of the people are facing the front for most of the time, isn't that the sum total of a director's work?

My response to the question always starts the same way too – by quoting Blair Edgar - a mentor of mine from my earliest days at the opera Studio Melbourne.

'In opera,' he said, 'everything you hear is the conductor's fault and everything you see is the director's fault.'

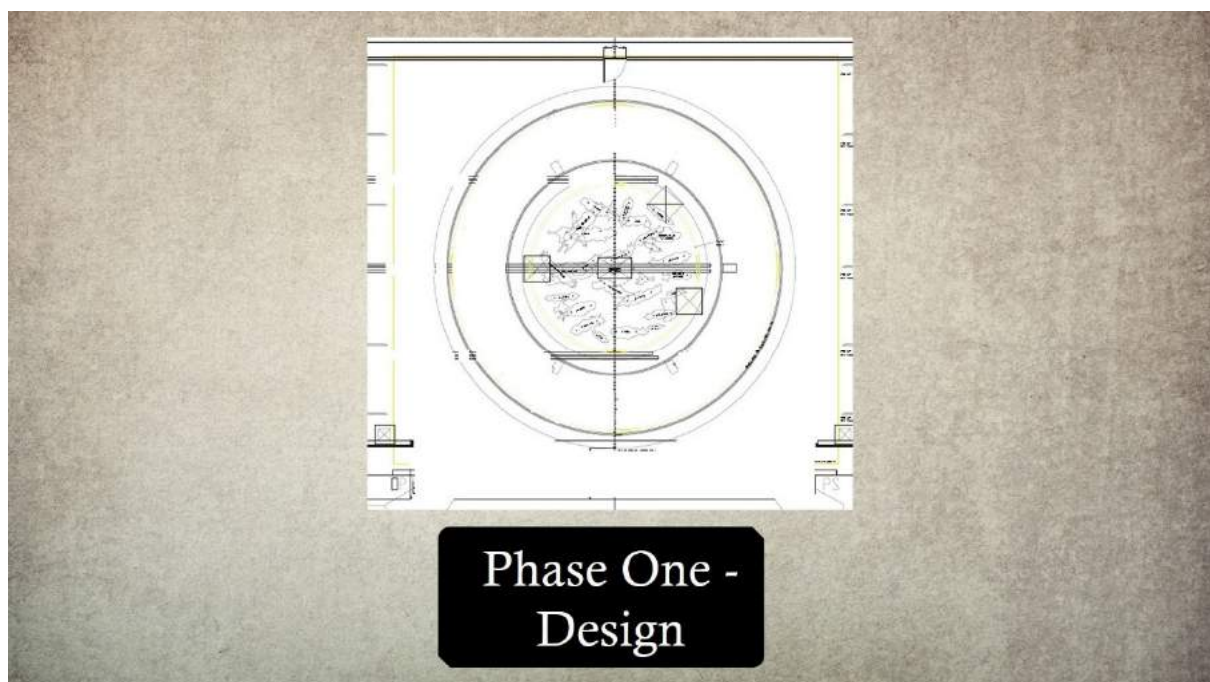
And, while not completely true, it does provide the basis of a good answer to this question.

Directors carry the artistic weight of everything visual on their shoulders.

We are typically engaged between 18 months and 3 years in advance of performance (Covent Garden, for example, programs 5 years ahead but is one of very few theatres to regularly do so).

Ordinarily, theatres have arranged their programmes already, and directors are offered a production from the set list that the theatre believes would suit their interest, aesthetic, or in some cases, their ability to work to a budget.

Directors usually then propose the names of designers they would like to work with and, subject to approval from management, then begins the first phase of building a production – the design process.



Schematic for the set & revolve for *Die Walküre* – Opera Australia
Director: Neil Armfield, Set: Robert Cousins

Every director-designer team works differently, but my preferred method of working is to set up regular meetings over several months so that I can discuss with my design partner the shape of the performance, the key elements that exist conceptually and the practicalities that are required in order to allow the performers to achieve the instructions of the text.

I am on record in several publications ...

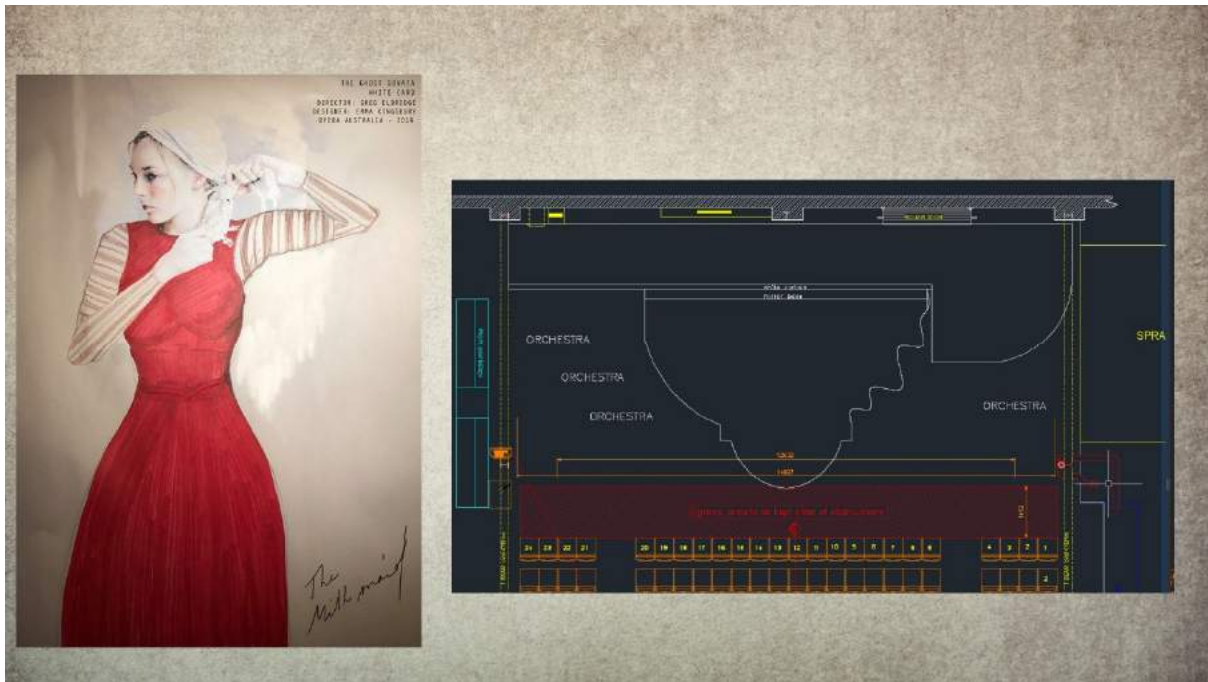


interview in OperaNow Magazine – June 2015

... including in OperaNow magazine in the UK, that my biggest issue with productions that I see is when performers reference a person or object that isn't there.

Not enough for me is the frequent practice of just putting into the surtitles the bits you want and leaving out the inconvenient bits – no, I speak the language well enough and know the pieces well enough to know that if a character says “here is my sword” there had better be a sword.

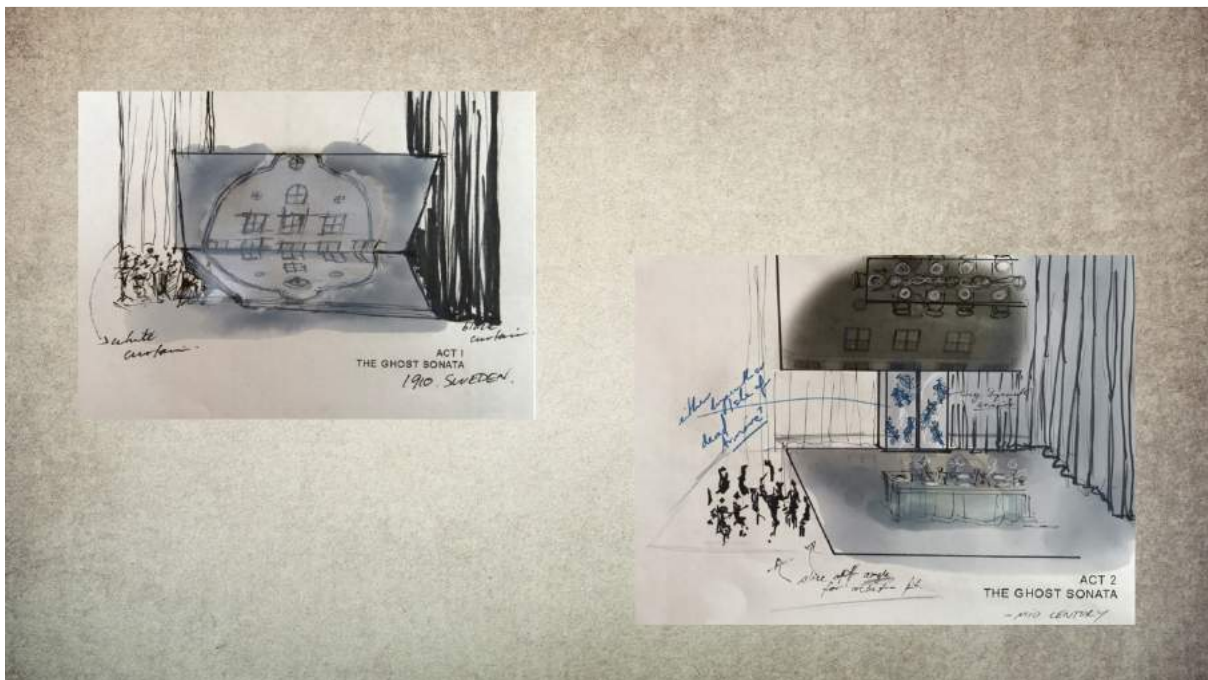
It is this kind of logistical planning that occurs at this stage as the designer and I thrash out the aesthetic elements that we like and we create a series of pages ...



Costume sketch and initial set schematic for *The Ghost Sonata* – Opera Australia
 Director: Greg Eldridge, Design: Emma Kingsbury

... containing reference images, rough sketches and other ideas that we then present to the company in a White Card Presentation, so called because at this early stage there is usually no modelling – only vague shapes and concepts with a couple of non-specific schematics.

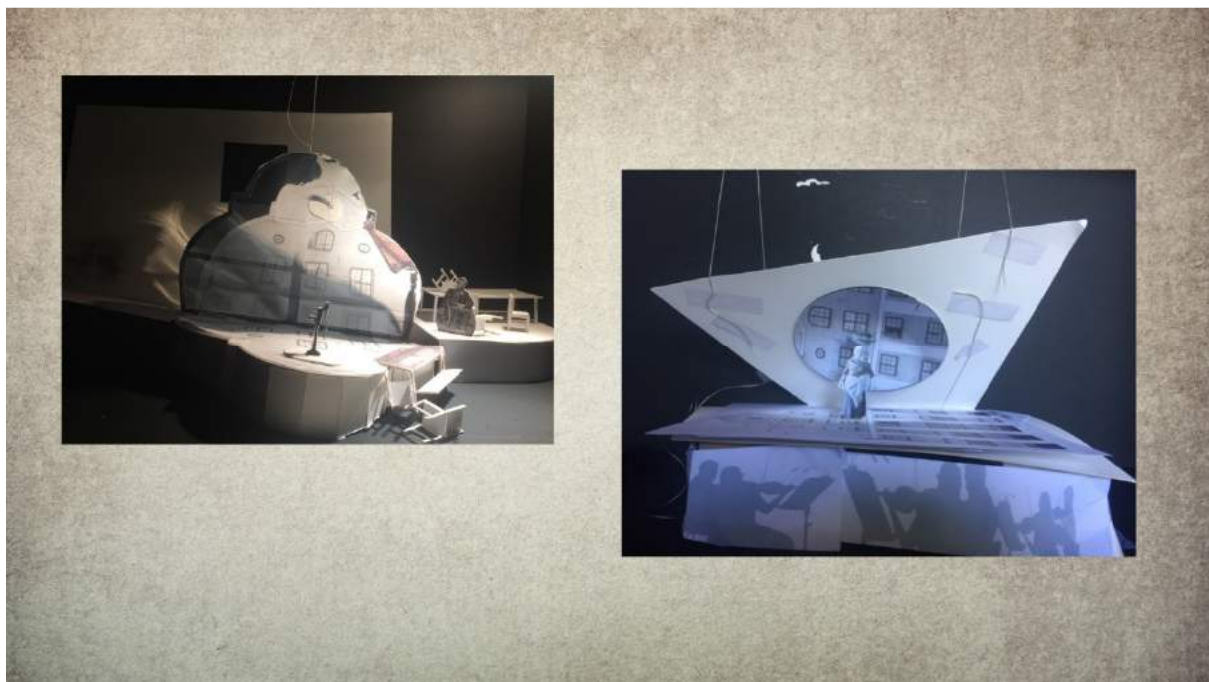
If the Artistic Directorate is happy with the concept, then we go into detail to design the set based on our original ideas.



Initial set sketches for *The Ghost Sonata* – Opera Australia
 Director: Greg Eldridge, Design: Emma Kingsbury

It is usual for several versions of a set to be thrown around and discarded before landing on something that feels right both in terms of its artistic expression and its ability to allow the performers to get around.

A second White Card Presentation cements the concept and then the designers and production managers and technicians all get together to make the set models



Alternative set models for *The Ghost Sonata* – Opera Australia
Director: Greg Eldridge, Design: Emma Kingsbury

and work out the specific detail of each set piece (how many millimetres thick, how wide, what precise dimensions of the built objects), and the costume designer meets with Wardrobe to go over patterns, fabrics, samples and dying.

All of this first phase occurs before a rehearsal room has even been booked.



Phase Two - Rehearsal

Rachel Kelly (mezzo) & Greg Eldridge (director) in rehearsal for The Royal Opera Covent Garden
Behind The Royal Scenes exhibition, photo: Signe Roderik

Once into rehearsal, things change and the director leads the room in exploring the dramatic motivations of the text.

Usually for me this involves discussing key character points with performers and explaining any representative elements of set or costume or action so that the performers can gain an understanding of the world that we are attempting to create.



Lise Lindstrom (soprano) & Greg Eldridge (director) in rehearsal for Opera Australia
photo: Tanja Binggeli

This is where the director's research starts to come into play; providing justifications for choices is a huge part of winning the trust of the performers, and without it the production is doomed to look vague and half-hearted.

I see the director's primary job to be to create the walls of the world that the characters will inhabit.



Greg Eldridge & stage management in rehearsal for The Royal Opera Covent Garden
photo: Neil Gillespie

When approaching a new production, the possibilities are almost infinite, and so by making clear and decisive choices (We are in the 17th century. You have previously had an affair with her. You are a drunk.), we set the rules that the world needs to all agree on in order to be a cohesive whole.

Following that our role is, I believe, largely to act as a mirror for the performers, to indicate to them when choices read well and when they don't and to provide advice on how intentions might be made clearer, emotions cleaner and more defined, and interactions either more realistic or less depending on the context.



Phase Three – The Stage

The transfer of the set to the stage is the Third Phase of the production.



Jonathan Rider (fight director) & Greg Eldridge (assistant director) & Keturah Stickann (director) in rehearsal
photo: Merola Opera Programme, San Francisco

With the director having been in contact with the lighting designer throughout the rehearsal process to indicate where people are likely to be at any given time, the lighting sessions start and together the director and lighting designer attempt to build the dramatic world into one with its own language of illumination.



The Fourth phase occurs after all the stage rehearsals and involves maintaining the production, which is a harder art than some might realise.

Being able to give just the right note at just the right time can completely change a performance, just as an ill-considered suggestion at an inopportune time has the potential to wreck a performance.

Of course, singers are a different beast to actors in that they are required to sing with the precision of an instrumentalist, while possessing an instrument that is fragile in nature and reactive to minute levels of stress and other non-physical factors.

It is another of the reasons that training for music-based directors is so important, as the differences between singers and actors is sufficient enough to warrant careful attention.

Which leads us to another point – why are there so many training and development opportunities for directors of spoken-word theatre and almost nothing for those wanting to specialise in music-theatre?

A friend of mine had the following experience when applying for a job on an opera being co-produced with a spoken-word theatre.

The Artistic Director invited my friend to interview for the job and, once in their office, said ‘Thank you for your application, but for this project we’re looking for a real director, not just someone who only works in opera.’ Stunned, my friend said that she thought opera shared many common elements with other theatrical forms while maintaining a distinctive style, in the same way that David Mamet and Caryl Churchill could be said to have elements in common while possessing distinctive differences. ‘Well,’ sniffed the Artistic Director, ‘I’ve never worked on an opera but a friend of mine has and he says they’re very different.’

There are many sad things about this story – not least of which that this particular Artistic Director had never experienced the joys, the emotions of the enmeshing of text and music.

The real tragedy was that my friend, who had spoken-word theatre training but was more interested in opera, had been denied an opportunity to continue to engage with the artform she loved, in exchange for someone who had not no experience in music-based theatre at all.

How, then, do we prepare the next generation of opera directors?

How do young directors as I was attempt to gain the training we need and the experiences we want in an environment that doesn't value this specialisation?

Most young directors start companies of their own, frustrated at the lack of opportunities within the established opera structures, simply so that they can practice the skills they will need if they are ever granted a position in the future.

Some buy gallons of coffee in the hope of so impressing an established director that they will allow them an unpaid observership which may lead to something further down the road.

But is leaving young directors to their own devices really the best we can do as an industry and as a collective of people who are dedicated to the future of our artform in order to ensure the quality of the next generation's work?

One of the first complaints to be levelled at an opera production is about its aesthetics – presumably because this is the most accessible thing to most people and requires less knowledge to denigrate than the music-making which seems to require slightly more basic understanding to critique. "I didn't like the set", "I didn't understand the movement", "I much prefer when it's set in period?"

There are, of course, two responses to this sort of criticism.

One is to outline in painstaking detail, as I hope I have done already this evening, that the value of art is in its myriad of interpretations and not to be found in one irrefutable version.

The other is to say “well, if you’re so concerned with what you perceive to be the erosion of artistic integrity, then do something about it!

Find a way to convince arts institutions to open their doors and allow young directors the access they’ve been crying out for for years to rehearsal rooms, coaching studios and technical nights in the theatre.”



The Future

Because it is really only through improving access to on-the-job training and allowing emerging directors to observe the realities of the rehearsal room that the quality of the artistic product can be maintained.

It is, I think, the sign of a short-term view if opera companies – whether professional or semi-amateur – are continuing to engage the same people to direct their shows, season on season.

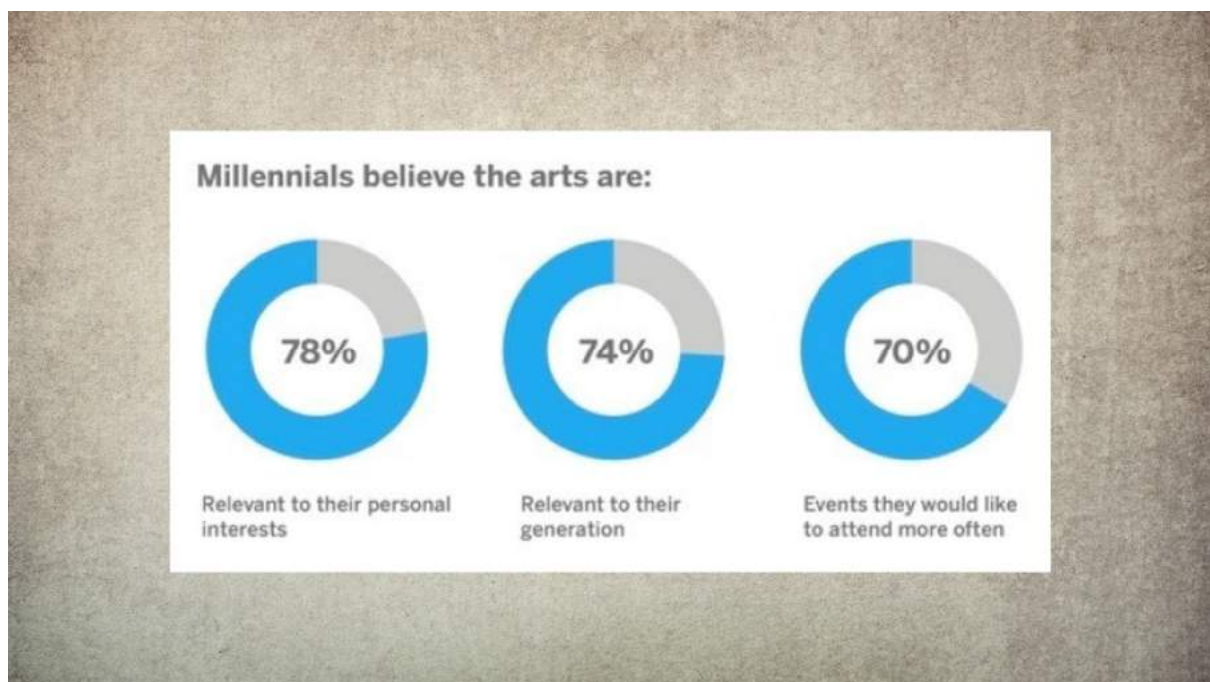
Where is the responsibility for the future of the artform that should compel these groups to foster younger talent and provide them with their own opportunities to assist, to experiment, to direct?

If someone who comes from the privileged position that I do has found it necessary to abandon my home for the better part of a decade in order to expose myself to the training that I know I need in order to create work that is compelling, intelligent and artistically-satisfying, then what hope do those in less able circumstances have?

And surely it is their voices that should be leading the interpretative conversation – their voices that should be given the opportunity to grow and to gain the knowledge they need to become leaders of interpretation.

And it is our duty to mentor and support them, and also to step aside for them when needed.

I mentioned in my earliest remarks that I was also not worried for the future of the arts, and I have reason for saying so, beyond the self-evident truth that no conservatoire I have ever seen has gone broke because of lack of interest from potential singers, actors or instrumentalists.



source: www.ausleisure.com.au/news/eventbrite-shares-insights-on-millennials-perspective-on-performing-and-vis/

An Eventbrite survey conducted 18 months ago found that millennials were flocking back to theatres, having discovered a deep desire to connect with the live theatre experience.

49% of millennials surveyed said that they had recently attended a live theatre performance, while 74% said that live theatre arts were relevant to their generation.

While this survey includes all live theatre events under the same umbrella, my own experience is that this is as true of the opera as it is of the other theatrical artforms.

The difference lies, perhaps, in the fact that opera as an artform requires newcomers to jump a slight hurdle of understanding before they can get the most out of their experience.

And there are certainly many who do just that – as a millennial myself, I am keenly aware that a great number of my peers have been willing to do the work required to fully engage with the artform that they love.

I know because I did it myself.

I had no plans to move into this line of work, but when I discovered the joy of opera – and of Wagner in particular – I made sure that I invested myself fully into understanding the storylines, researching the contexts and engrossing myself in the music in order to come with as fully-prepared a mind as I could to each performance.

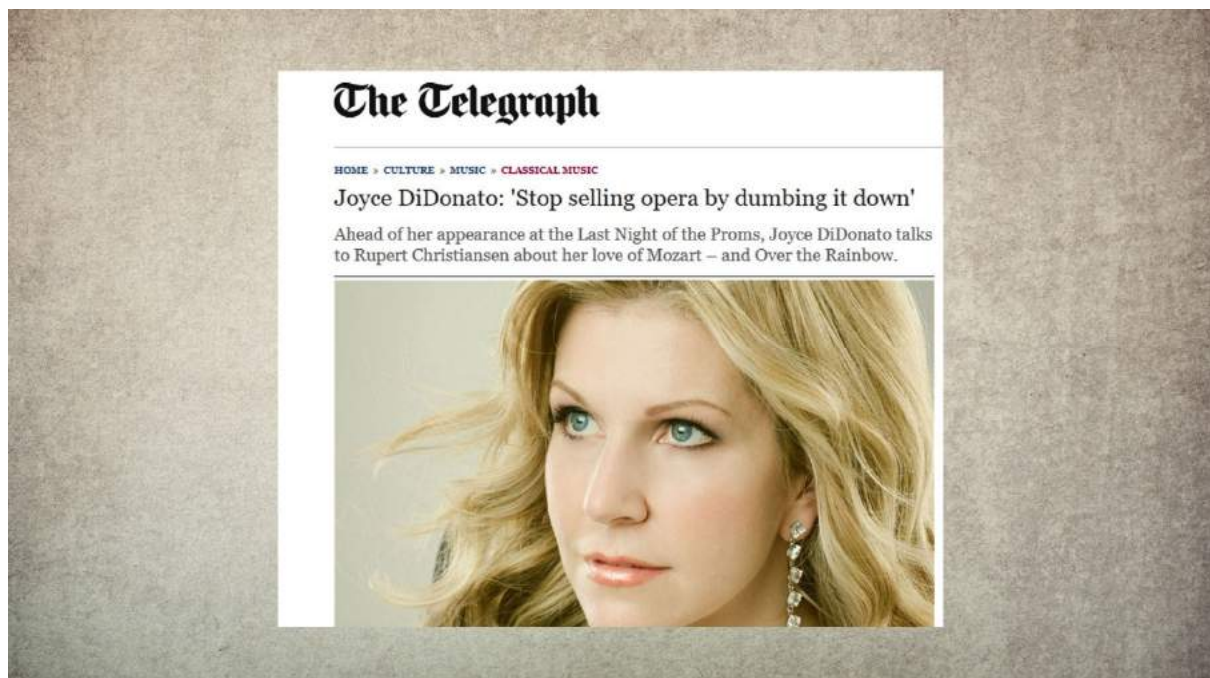
Which brings me to my final point – I am not ashamed to say that opera is an art that requires much of its audiences.

It is sung in foreign language, so it helps to have some understanding of those.

It does deal with complex discussions of power and politics, both in literal narrative and, as with Wagner, in metaphor and representation.

And it requires a desire not just to be entertained, but to engage with these concepts with a mind open to being challenged and questioned.

I make no apology for these facts –it is my belief that opera companies should stop doing so as well, and I'm not alone in professing this view.



source: www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/classicalmusic/10245140/Joyce-DiDonato-Stop-selling-opera-by-dumbing-it-down.html

There is no suggestion that the corps de ballet should do simpler steps in order to attract a younger audience that can emulate them, no – the point of the artform is that these people perform superhuman physical feats with an apparent effortlessness.

So it is with the opera, where singers perform superhuman feats of endurance while singing higher, lower, faster, slower than anyone has right to do.



And my contention is that, so long as we equip our next generation of opera directors with the skills and knowledge required to make Great Artistic Choices, we should make no apology for the interpretive risks taken by those who are genuinely interested in exploring the deepest levels of the human condition through the miraculous art that has been gifted to us by the genius of Mozart, and Strauss, and Wagner.

I say, let there be more bellowings at fate and death, and the more voices bellowing, the better.