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MUSIC Updating Opera? Halfway Won't Do

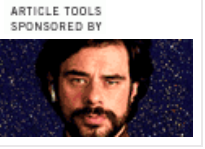


Monika Rittershaus/Los Angeles Opera

Anja Kampe, front, and Linda Watson in the Los Angeles Opera's production of "Die Walküre." By ANTHONY TOMMASINI Published: September 30, 2009

ALTHOUGH opera might be healthier if die-hard fans were as intensely curious about new works as theatergoers are, you have to admire the passion with which opera enthusiasts defend the staples. Still, it makes me uncomfortable when I hear an opera lover, myself included, castigating a new production of a classic by saying, "It was a violation of Verdi." Or, "The director just ignored the stage directions." Or, "Wotan would never do that." An opera score is not a sacred text. Directors should claim the freedom to reinterpret a work.

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That protectionist sentiment probably accounted for the vehement booing that greeted the director Luc Bondy and his production team when the Metropolitan Opera introduced its new staging of Puccini's "Tosca" on Sept. 21. The show is no Eurotrash outrage. Mr. Bondy does not even update the setting, let alone turn things surreal or present the story of Tosca, a famed prima donna; her hotheaded rebel lover, Mario Cavaradossi; and the twisted chief of police, Baron Scarpia, as a rehearsal of a modern-

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(September 27, 2009)

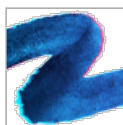
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Monika Rittershaus/Los Angeles Opera
Plácido Domingo, center, in "Die Walküre."

day opera company's "Tosca" production.

The problems arose, it would seem, because for all its contemporary trappings, the production was essentially traditional. So even little deviations from the source seemed like a self-conscious attempt by Mr. Bondy to shake up "Tosca" and rattle "Tosca" lovers.

Now, for an unabashedly avant-garde approach to a staple, there is the Los Angeles Opera's new production of Wagner's "Ring" cycle, directed by Achim Freyer, which is being introduced in installments, so far to mixed reactions. I saw "Die Walküre" last spring and will attend the recently opened "Siegfried" on Wednesday. ("Götterdämmerung" arrives in April, and three complete cycles will be presented in May and June.)

Mr. Freyer, a German theater artist, painter and director, who is overseeing all aspects of the production, tries to capture the magical elements of this mythological tale through weirdly abstract costumes, sets and staging. Characters wield neon spears that look like Jedi light sabers. Alien creatures descend from above and infiltrate the action, a lot of which is not depicted, so that Mr. Freyer can delve into Jungian resonances.

When the long-separated twins Siegmund and Sieglinde meet during Act I of "Die Walküre" ([Plácido Domingo](#) and Anja Kampe in the performance I attended), they are surreal, half-complete figures: Siegmund's face is painted white on one side, black on the other; Sieglinde's, in reverse. Rather than falling helplessly into a sensual embrace, for long stretches of the act the two are sequestered atop small platforms on opposite sides of the stage, facing forward, seldom looking at each other.

I terribly miss the human dimensions of the characters in this sci-fi "Ring." After all, Wagner meant for us to see ourselves in this story of a tormented, overreaching god and his dysfunctional family.

But say what you will, Mr. Freyer has a strong production concept, which he conveys through elaborate, sometimes dazzling and very expensive imagery and stage effects (costing more than \$32 million). The lesson seems clear: If you decide to go with a concept, stick with it.

No similarly strong take emerges in Mr. Bondy's convoluted "Tosca," which replaces the Met's lavishly realistic [Franco Zeffirelli](#) production. At least Mr. Zeffirelli's popular show had luxurious style, something you can't say of Mr. Bondy's anti-Zeffirelli staging, with its cold, spare, emaciated sets.

Mr. Bondy seemed determined to show what a sexually sadistic monster Scarpia is. Actually, I have never seen a production of "Tosca" in which Scarpia's lechery and ruthlessness has not been utterly evident. The bigger challenge for a director is to convey Scarpia's other side, the aristocratic bearing and courtly manners that he can turn on as the occasion demands.

A similar problem afflicts many productions of [Mozart's](#) "Don Giovanni." Determined to



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show Giovanni as a reprobate who runs through women, directors fail to convey his high-born swagger and rakish charm.

It is understandable that a director might want to clear out the theatrical clichés that have attached to a classic, even to the point of discounting stage directions. But if the production is essentially traditional, that director had better come up with compelling alternative action.

Take the ending of Act II in the new "Tosca." When Scarpia makes his proposition — if Tosca will succumb to him just once, he will retract Mario's death sentence and set the lovers free — she is forced into the unthinkable: she must kill him.

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Updating Opera? Halfway Won't Do

Published: September 30, 2009

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As the music, the stage directions and what we have learned about Tosca so far in the opera all suggest, she stabs Scarpia in a fit of desperation and will. This comes through in the vehement phrases she sings as Scarpia dies, affirming, almost in an existential rant, what she has done: "This is Tosca's kiss!" "Look at me! It is I, Tosca, O Scarpia!"

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Jack Vartoogian for The New York Times
Deborah Polaski (from left), Julia Juon and Deborah Voigt in "Frau Ohne Schatten."

But in Mr. Bondy's staging, Tosca (the charismatic soprano [Karita Mattila](#)) plots the murder, albeit quickly. Devising an entrapment for Scarpia, she reclines, alluringly, on a couch, the knife hidden behind her, awaiting her prey. That Tosca would be so calculating at this moment seems all wrong. There I go, sounding like an opera fanatic saying, "Tosca would not do that." But directors like Mr. Bondy drive you to it.

Then, as the stage directions indicate, during a long span of eerily subdued orchestral music Tosca enacts a ritual, placing candles on either side of Scarpia's body and a crucifix on his heart. This theatrical stroke is clearly too familiar and melodramatic for Mr. Bondy.

Instead, he has Ms. Mattila climb to the threshold of a window, where she considers leaping to her death. But she collects herself and slinks onto a couch next to the one over which Scarpia's body is sprawled. As the curtain falls, she appears to be musing on what has happened and what to do next.

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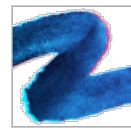
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What of the candles and crucifix? That

Tosca is a devout believer is central to her character. Yes, she is having an affair with Mario, which is technically a sin. But Tosca has a deeply personal relationship with the [Madonna](#). They speak woman to woman. Tosca is an artist; she cannot follow norms. She is sure that the Madonna understands this.

So when Tosca kills Scarpia, even though he was evil, she must both expiate her sin and enact a sacred ritual for his sorry soul. A director who ignores this staging idea, the work of another production team (Puccini and his librettists), had better have a brilliant substitute. "Should I kill myself?" hardly qualifies.

Many opera directors have revealed fresh insights into works through the simple device of updating. Updating has gotten a bad rap. Shifting a story to another era can easily seem a glib and arbitrary maneuver. But done with imagination, an updated production can take today's audiences to the core of a familiar work. Jonathan Miller's inspired production of Verdi's "Rigoletto," for example, first presented at the English National Opera in 1982.

Mr. Miller relocates the story from 16th-century Mantua to Little Italy in Manhattan in the 1950s. The Duke of Mantua becomes a powerful, preening head of a Mafia gang. And in an ingenious stroke, Rigoletto, Verdi's hunchbacked court jester, who must keep the Duke and his entourage amused and be the butt of jokes, becomes the bartender at the gang's favorite hangout.

One of the stated missions of [Peter Gelb](#) as general manager of the Met is to entice new audiences into the opera house with boldly theatrical productions. But who is the target audience for this muddled half-and-half "Tosca," no experiment in audacious modern theater?

[Joseph Volpe](#), Mr. Gelb's predecessor, took more risks in recruiting directors than he is generally given credit for, though mainly with operas of second-tier popularity. [Robert Wilson](#)'s boldly abstract staging of Wagner's "Lohengrin" was booed on opening night in 1998 but cheered the next season, after audiences had adjusted to the look and concept of the work, and after the cast's original stylized hand and arm gestures had been toned down considerably. Herbert Wernicke's wondrous fairy-tale staging of Strauss's "Frau Ohne Schatten" remains one of my all-time favorite Met shows. Other standouts included Jürgen Flimm's production of [Beethoven](#)'s "Fidelio," placed in some vaguely contemporary repressive state, and [Francesca Zambello](#)'s elegantly mystical rendering of [Berlioz](#)'s "Troyens."

But for the bread-and-butter works, like "La Bohème" "Turandot," "La Traviata" and, yes, "Tosca," Mr. Volpe wanted productions from which the Met could get some mileage and pack in audiences even when the casts were routine. This usually meant ordering up another Zeffirelli extravaganza.

You can make fun of Mr. Volpe's pragmatism, but he had a point. If

Mary Zimmerman's new production of Rossini's fantastical "Armida" or Pierre Audi's new staging of Verdi's "Attila," both due this season, are wild and crazy shows, why not? Opera buffs have little emotional stake in these works. But the Met is going to have to wring a lot of life from Mr. Bondy's "Tosca."

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