



Features

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Bartlett's Quotations

This month, director Bartlett Sher - who scored a huge hit at the Met in 2006 with his lively staging of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* - returns to the company to explore the complexities of Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*. BARRY SINGER reports.



Photo by Gregory Downer

Bartlett Sher is an improviser, which is not to suggest that he is in any sense unprepared. "I can talk for hours beforehand, but until I'm in that rehearsal room it's all speculation," he insists. "You can't come in with everything finished in your head. You've got to *make* something."

Sher's vivid ability to "make something" has made him the most widely admired director in musical theater today. His revivifying direction of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* at Lincoln Center

Theater was rewarded with a Tony Award. Two preceding triumphs - a shimmering 2005 production of Adam Guettel's musical *The Light in the Piazza*, also for Lincoln Center Theater, and Sher's intoxicating reimagining of Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* for the Met the following year - already had set him apart with a quality that one is tempted to call "the Sher effect": an onstage synthesis of intellect and emotion so effortless and organic as to be utterly breathtaking.

Sher's new production of Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* - the impressionistic, episodic saga of a poet named Hoffmann, his loves and his losses in flight from, and in search of, his Muse - has its premiere on December 3 with a cast led by Joseph Calleja as Hoffmann. The matching of Sher with *Hoffmann* is an apt one. In a fascinating sense, Offenbach's kaleidoscopic concoction mirrors Sher's deepest dramatic concerns. "*Hoffmann* resonates very strongly with the way I perceive the theater," he admits. "When you look at *Hoffmann's* disjointed structure, there is nothing literally there, but you may find yourself sobbing. It resonates within you emotionally for reasons that are not entirely clear. That is the kind of thing I'm after. In opera I try to find where the music has that kind of expression in it, and where the piece itself has that feeling. I try to find where those two realms meet. My role, as I see it, is to dig around in the music and dig around in the narrative and then devise a structure that releases that information as feelings, in the audience."

Sher has just completed a day of rehearsals with the first road company for *South Pacific*. He is plopped wearily in a chair in a rehearsal room near Times Square, surrounded by trunks tattooed with the names of his cast members, all ready to be shipped out. "*Hoffmann* was really the choice of the Met," he notes, acknowledging that the selection was a good one. "It's an opera that I do love. I don't really know it well but I know it. I have seen it. I've never directed it, but I have a process for approaching operas that I've never directed. I'm not a person who reads music well. I have a friend I've worked with on music for over twenty-five years. He literally analyzes the score for me, and we go through every single note and every single word, and we listen to every single recording we can get our hands on.

"My own storytelling intuitions can only come from a deep analysis of the text," he goes on. "At a psychological and psycho-sexual level, *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* is very complex. It is never a literal narrative - it's more a sexual and emotional history combined with an artistic history of the artist. You also have a lot of really complicated textual issues. It all strangely suits my way of working. I don't know what the piece is about until I physically feel it take its shape. I've got to slog through right there with the actors before I know where I'm going."

Having listened to the numerous versions of *Hoffmann* that exist, Sher has come to believe that James Levine's take on the opera is the best. "James has edited everything to make it really sensible - there are a lot of difficult leaps you have to make in this piece - while keeping it engaging dramatically. He's got such a great dramatic sense. His version clarifies the fact that *Hoffmann* really is an artistic history, finally, rather than a romantic one. We begin with Olympia first, the doll sequence - right?" Sher pauses, thrown for a moment. "That's Olympia, right? Then Antonia, the violin-teacher's daughter, second, and the Giulietta section third. I think that was Offenbach's original order, and it is certainly the way to go.

"Some get into *Hoffmann* the opera," Sher maintains, "because E. T. A. Hoffmann the writer - author of the stories that the libretto was based on, and the opera's central character - was this crazy madman. For me, though, the opera has more to do with Offenbach. I find Hoffmann interesting, but I don't find

him nearly as interesting as what it was that drew Offenbach to these particular pieces of his - what Offenbach was attracted to, and where he was in his own life.

"What I'm most interested in is Offenbach's Jewishness," Sher announces quietly. "Offenbach was a popular writer in France - the Can-Can and all that - but he never felt accepted there. As a Jew, he never *was* accepted, not on a serious level, even after converting to Catholicism. I think Offenbach had that sense of anxiety and outsidership that comes with being Jewish. I think it was his core. So I'm trying to root this production in what that thing is that one does to feel accepted, and what it feels like to make the effort to become assimilated and to still be rejected - to try to connect and to still be pushed out."

Sher's interest in Offenbach's Judaic shadow is understandable. He has spoken openly and often about his parents' Catholicism, his Jesuit education as one of seven children, and his discovery at the age of nine that his insurance-broker father not only had fathered a second family with another woman but was not, in fact, the Lithuanian-born Catholic he claimed to be; rather, he was a Lithuanian Jew, whose parents had immigrated to California in the 1920s. "Yes," Sher grins, "Offenbach's story certainly resonates with my own.

"The deepest level of the effort to be assimilated," Sher believes, "is through love - sexual love. Offenbach converted to Catholicism and married a Catholic girl, but he still was never accepted. This led me, strangely enough, to Kafka, the classic outsider - the alienated, ambivalent, assimilated European Jew."

So Sher's *Hoffmann* will be set in Kafka's Mitteleuropa?

"It'll look like that," Sher evasively acknowledges, "but not entirely. By the time you get to the last act in Venice, it all gets more complicated. The opening prologue is clearly at the opera, but the opera they're doing is *Don Giovanni*, so we have eighteenth-century period costumes as seen through the early twentieth century. Then the final Giulietta/Venice act really feels pretty eighteenth century, simply because Venice always feels pretty eighteenth century. So, what period is my *Hoffmann* set in? Early twentieth century, I think."

Was there anything Sher suggested for this rather radical rethinking of *Hoffmann* that his collaborator, James Levine, rejected? "No," Sher instantly replies, "there's really been nothing I've proposed that he has resisted. His big concern has always revolved around space onstage at the Met. When I was working with him on the passerelle that I had in mind for *Barber*, he was very supportive, but he said the thing was too big - not for the voices, but for that kind of opera. So I pulled it down a bit, made it a little smaller, and it proved exactly right for the size of the sound. That was Jim. He knows that space better than anybody in the world."

Sher shakes his head. "A lot of people in opera get very hung up about 'What's it sound like?' I think how it sounds is very much affected by how the story is told. If you stage it well and you keep the audience connected to the narrative, by the time they get to that beautiful aria and they're in the pocket of what it all really means, they're going to hear better. It's my job to get them there - to the realization 'Oh my god, I completely understand why this aria comes at *this* moment in *this* piece!'"

The heavy lifters have come for the trunks. Sher, however, has one final extended thought to

formulate. "What do I think moved Offenbach to write this particular piece?" he practically shouts over the traveling trunk din. "That is the question I'm trying to ask with this production. I don't know the answer yet. His own love of women was certainly part of it, as was Hoffmann's crazy style of writing, where things didn't always add up, as a cover for the things Hoffmann was thereby enabled to explore. A lot of interpretive critics will tell you that the writer himself does not always know why. Writers are drawn to something for often unknowable reasons, and then that stuff begins to emerge in the work. My job is not to answer why but rather to give you, the audience, the feeling of what it's like to be drawn to this story, from the point of view that the writer was drawn to it. If I can get that going in the room," concludes Bart Sher, "that is an enormous accomplishment." □

BARRY SINGER *won a 2007 ASCAP Deems Taylor award for his most recent book, Alive at the Village Vanguard.*

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