



Features

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Traviata Laid Bare

Director Willy Decker's revolutionary, pared-down Salzburg staging of Verdi's deathless love story has arrived at the Met. BARRY SINGER reports.



Photo: Kirsten Neumann
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The barrel curls of bygone days are gone in Willy Decker's radical mounting of *La Traviata*, opening on New Year's Eve at the Met. With general manager Peter Gelb's eager assent and Decker's inspiration, the traditional trappings of Victoriana in which Franco Zeffirelli swathed the Met stage for so many years, for better or worse, have now been swept away.

"Many people think that *La Traviata* can only be done in the past," Decker acknowledges, speaking by telephone from his office in Gelsenkirchen, Germany. "I hear this many, many times — 'I can only imagine *La Traviata* in the nineteenth century.' But this is a cliché, and a dangerous cliché, at that. It means that you cannot open yourself to the enormous potential that the piece has, the enormous human potential, that is anything but museum-like."

If the chic opera universe that Gelb yearns to conjure at the Met possesses a defining showpiece this season, it may not, in fact, be the extravagant *Das Rheingold* of Robert Lepage but Willy Decker's hedonistic yet austere updating of *La Traviata*. Gelb is looking to visionary directors such as Decker to reinvigorate Met audiences with a more contemporary aesthetic. Stark, sleek productions such as Decker's new *Traviata* proffer stripped-down dramatic values and fashionable minimalism in place of scenic excess.

"Period settings inevitably fill the stage with period elements. My experience with directing opera — *any* opera — has been that if you remain in period, any period, the characters inevitably feel further away from you," Decker insists. "You see them through a historical filter. I want to bring characters as close to you, *yourself*, as possible — to bring out our inner compassion, which comes from our identification with characters as human beings. My interest is to empty the stage, to clear it as much as possible. I look to create not so much a modern surrounding as a timeless surrounding.

"There may be operas that absolutely need a historical aspect," Decker concedes. "*Boris Godunov* comes to me as an example. *Rosenkavalier* I've done in period, and I can't see it being done any other way — or *Capriccio*, for that matter. But even *DonCarlo*, which I once staged completely historically in Amsterdam, when I look back at it now, I think, 'You should not have done it!' I would never call this a law. It's a decision that has to be made based on ideas, not just to say, 'I want to do it modern.' But it is a basic issue when directing opera today."

This basic issue can, of course, be viewed from other, opposing perspectives. Traditionalists, for example, may well argue that it is the minimalist/modernist retooling of period works that has become, if not the ironclad law, then at least the knee-jerk response of opera directors today when confronted with the challenge of restaging some familiar classic anew. This seems particularly true of European opera directors.

Decker's *Traviata* was created for the Salzburg Festival in 2005, with Anna Netrebko and Rolando Villazón as its stars. (At the Met, Marina Poplavskaya will sing Violetta, Matthew Polenzani Alfredo.) The director's rethinking of Verdi's warhorse created a sensation via the deployment of one red dress, one mixed chorus in mannish black suits, a red sofa, a white semi-circular stage wall and a large clock, as stand-ins for all the historical frippery of *Traviatas* past.

In fact, Verdi himself conceived *Traviata* in the 1850s as a contemporary piece, with no historical weight at all. Restaging it in the here and now today might very well have met with his approval. Decker, however, has gone beyond mere modernization. "I decided to situate the entire narrative in one room. And I wanted to find the perfect form as dictated by the theatrical, musical essence of Verdi's score. When I again listened to the music before staging it for Salzburg, I was taken by the power of the central rhythm of the piece, which is the waltz rhythm. The waltz thus dictates the basic form of the production — the circle. *Traviata* actually starts circularly. The very beginning contains Violetta's death music from Act III. Another central aspect is the aspect of time. Violetta is always so painfully aware of time running out. You hear that, too, in the music's rhythms, which keep driving you forward. I decided we had to have a clock onstage always — over-dimensional, larger than life — a clock that is also circular. The circle is, of course, the basic shape of human life. The room that we use is therefore a pure circular shape. A circular room is one from which you cannot easily escape."

Productions of *Traviata* have long venerated Violetta as a saintly figure of sacrifice — a fallen woman who gives up her one chance of happiness for love. No period more perfectly suits this sacrificial sense than the masochistically pious Victorian age. But a consumptive paradigm of

self-abnegating Victorian womanhood is not necessarily the most compelling heroine for our own age of empowered women. For younger viewers in particular, reducing the Violetta victim factor would seem to make the opera more immediate and accessible. This, more or less, is what Decker has done.

"I hadn't thought of it that way," he laughs. "I do feel very strongly that *Traviata* is more focused on its central role than perhaps any other Verdi piece. The fact is, this young woman is dying. And that is what *La Traviata* is about — its central character dying alone, and us watching her die."

There has always been a strain of voyeurism inherent in *La Traviata*. The implication of watching Violetta die alone has traditionally been that we are somehow improved, if not redeemed, by witnessing her death. Decker, though, is aiming for something more — identification.

"We follow the process of her death in an almost breathless way," says Decker. "It is as if we, the audience, feel the pressure, feel the time running out for Violetta's life. I also wanted to focus on the fact that Violetta knows exactly what is happening to her. She is terribly aware of everything that she does.

"I suppose I have, in that sense, empowered her," he adds, almost apologetically. "But only as a result of my enormous feeling and admiration for her."

illy Decker was born in Pulheim, near Cologne, in 1950. After studying violin at the Rheinische Musikschule, he immersed himself in the study of philosophy and philology at Cologne University. "I was introduced to the opera pretty early, growing up," he notes. "Many of my mother's family sang in the opera chorus as semi-professionals. I studied music and was a musician first. But there was always a conflict in me between my non-intellectual love of making music and my intellectual side — my love of philosophy and literature. I was quite back and forth early on between these two sides of myself. Then in college I came to realize that opera could combine the two for me. And I actually began studying to become an opera director."

Decker went to work as an assistant director at Cologne State Opera. "My first big productions as a director were all at the Cologne opera house," he says. "My very first big piece was *Zar und Zimmermann*, a singspiel from the early nineteenth century that is still very popular in Germany but not well known at all in America, which is probably a good thing. I staged it very much in period. But fairly soon I found myself wanting to try and clear out the stage space as an opera director. To do that, I had to stop weighing my productions down with period details."

Decker eventually became Cologne Opera's principal resident stage director, in 1986. Over the years, he has staged new productions for many other major European houses, including a mounting of Strauss's *Arabella* for Covent Garden that traveled to Lyric Opera of Chicago in 1984. In 2004, Decker directed a warmly received *Billy Budd* for San Francisco Opera. That same year, he made his Salzburg Festival debut with a production of Korngold's *Die Tote Stadt*, returning the following year with *La Traviata*. A few days, or maybe a few weeks, after the premiere, Decker remembers, Gelb called.

One might well ask, what took the Met so long? Yet there are significant risks for Gelb in installing a minimalist production custom-made for the Salzburg Festival as a staple in his

repertory house for, quite possibly, twenty years to come. Time may have staled Franco Zeffirelli's opulent work at the Met, but year after year there was, indisputably, always something to come and look at, as well as listen to. Whether Willy Decker's red dress and solitary set will have the same staying power for returning audiences, only time will tell. Is Decker at all worried about how his work may be received by Metropolitan Opera audiences?

He sighs. "This is something that you have to live with as a director. I can imagine that maybe for many opera-lovers in New York a non-historical *Traviata* is perhaps even disturbing. But this is O.K. Everybody has to react the way they feel. I'm not afraid of it. It wouldn't be the first time that I faced a negative response.

"What I do hope is that people appreciate that I'm not pretending," Decker adds — "that this comes from the heart, from a very deep love of the piece and of Verdi. That I do this for him and for his opera, not to show off in any way. I would hope, in the end, that the audiences are moved. If you can move an audience, it really doesn't matter how you achieve it." □

BARRY SINGER *is writing a new book, to be published next year, entitled Churchill Style: The Art of Being Winston Churchill.*

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