

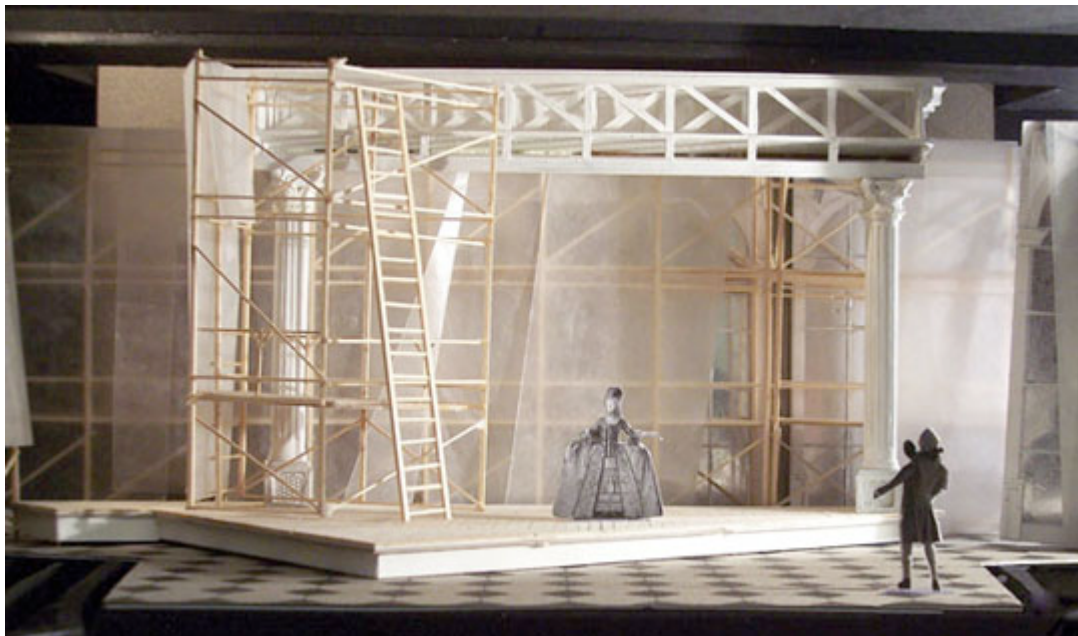


Features

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Stimulus Plans

In June, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis will present a scaled-down version of John Corigliano's epic *The Ghosts of Versailles* as part of its festival season; the following month, Paul Moravec's *The Letter* will have its world premiere at Santa Fe Opera. BARRY SINGER looks at these two very different works and reveals how they reflect the changing face of opera production.



Set design by Allen Moyer for *Ghosts of Versailles* at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis
Courtesy Opera Theatre of Saint Louis/set design by Allen Moyer

The whole extravagant enterprise reportedly cost the Met \$4 million to produce in 1991, with sets and costumes by John Conklin that rank among the most lavishly over-the-top ever undertaken for an opera. In subject matter, too, the piece spoke pointedly to the times, and beyond; no contemporary opera has ever captured better the ecstasies of excess, coupled with the agonizing depths of collapse and ruin. By digging up Versailles's profligate ghosts, led by Marie Antoinette herself, and setting them spinning (and singing) in an eternity of unrelenting rue, composer John Corigliano and his librettist, William M. Hoffman, conjured an acutely embracing metaphor for

hubristic boom and bust of any kind, a metaphor that keeps on paying dividends right up to our own egregious moment in time.

Fittingly, *The Ghosts of Versailles* has proved almost too spectacular to remount. A major Met revival scheduled for the 2009-10 season was recently scrapped in response to our darkening economic reality. Aside from a return to the Met stage back in 1995, a coproduction at Lyric Opera of Chicago that same year and a European premiere in 1999 for the opening of the new Niedersächsische Staatsoper in Hannover, Germany, the work has never been seen again, anywhere, on a professional level - nor was it ever recorded, save for a live video (now out of print) filmed during its initial Met run.

Yet *The Ghosts of Versailles* now seems primed once more to tap into the prevailing economic mood. This month, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis will present a new, ascetic remounting of this epic work of excess, slimmed down for a smaller, more standard-sized orchestra and shorn of its costly scenic frippery in favor of cost-efficient video and multi-media projections. A coproduction with Vancouver Opera and Ireland's Wexford Festival Opera, this "reduced" version, with sets by Allen Moyer, costumes by James Schuette and video design by Wendall Harrington, stars Maria Kanyova and James Westman as Marie Antoinette and Beaumarchais, conducted by Michael Christie and directed by Opera Theatre of Saint Louis's current artistic director, James Robinson, successor to the late Colin Graham, who staged the opera's Met premiere.



The Metropolitan Opera's 1991 world-premiere staging of *Ghosts of Versailles*
© Johan Elbers 2009

"What we needed to do was to embrace the intimacy - yes, *intimacy* - of the story," Robinson maintains. "The story is actually quite compact, tight and even introspective. Rather than maximize the opera, we decided to minimalize it, set in the place where William Hoffman

suggests it should be set - the theater of the Petit Trianon, Versailles. We're using the most essential theatrical elements to convey merging realities. We thought a combination of video and projection would add an immediacy to the spectacle without overwhelming it."

How much cheaper is Opera Theatre of Saint Louis's *Ghosts of Versailles*? Try \$3 million cheaper. According to a spokesman for the theater, *Ghosts* will cost about \$1 million in sum - "\$100,000 for the commission itself, \$250,000 for paint, wood, fabric and video materials, and the rest for 'people' - the production team, construction and other crews, artists, orchestra and chorus. This is somewhat more than we usually spend, because it's a commission and also a large cast," the spokesman concedes. "Happily, we do have two coproducers."

Where "spectacle" reigned in the years of Wall Street's dominance, "minimal" and "compact" are surely the inexorable usurpers of opera's future. The question "How cheaply can we do it?" may now be the dominant refrain in opera houses for some time to come. Which new works will get produced and which will not is, of course, impossible to say, though it seems a safe bet that *The Ghosts of Versailles*, in its original grand size, would have had no chance in this nickel-and-dime revolution.



Set design by Hildegard Bechtler for The Singapore Club in Santa Fe Opera's world-premiere staging of *The Letter*

Courtesy Santa Fe Opera/scenic design by Hildegard Bechtler

The Letter is another story - a 1924 Somerset Maugham short story, actually, that Santa Fe Opera will present newly musicalized this July, with a score by the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Paul Moravec, a libretto by the prolific critic and arts journalist Terry Teachout, scenic design by Hildegard Bechtler and costumes by fashion icon Tom Ford, as directed by Jonathan Kent. Set in British colonial Malaya between the wars, *The Letter's* brittle, noirish tale of adultery, murder,

blackmail and revenge was turned into a play by Maugham himself a year after its initial publication and into a Hollywood film twice thereafter, the second time in 1940, with Bette Davis famously in the lead and William Wyler directing. In Santa Fe, Patrick Summers will conduct Patricia Racette, Anthony Michaels-Moore and Keith Jameson as Maugham's triangle of lovers, along with James Maddalena, as the lawyer who knows all of them far too well. The piece has evolved into something of a showcase for Racette, whose history with Santa Fe Opera is long, and whose input into rewrites on *The Letter* was apparently welcomed by its creators.

Though Santa Fe's commission was initiated two years ago, *The Letter* now stands as an unexpected object lesson for navigating opera's impecunious future. Clocking in at a mere ninety minutes in length (divided into eight scenes), with a cast of seven principals, plus supernumeraries and choristers totaling nineteen in number (as opposed to *Ghosts of Versailles*'s onstage minions too numerous to count), *The Letter* cost a relatively meager \$2 million-and-change to bring to the stage.

"It now can be done again and again," acknowledges Charles MacKay, Santa Fe's new general director, who inherited *The Letter* from his predecessor, Richard Gaddes. "It sure is a blessing for me - and such an intimate scale will enable other companies to do it too, in time. Extravaganzas like *Ghosts of Versailles* don't have that chance. They're hostages to fortune."

In fact, *Ghosts* and *The Letter* share surface confluences. Both are the first operas of composers who have won Pulitzer Prizes for concert music. Both are the work of librettists who were neighbors and close friends of their respective composers. And both are being done by opera companies that bear the deep, long-term imprint of Richard Gaddes. It was Gaddes who founded Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, in 1976, and served as its first general director until 1985, while retaining an involvement with Santa Fe Opera that dated back to 1969 and extended through his just-ended tenure as only the second general director in that company's history.



"You receive endless requests from composers who hope you will listen to the work they've written and perhaps produce it," Gaddes rather wearily remarks. "A pianist acquaintance of mine actually recommended Paul Moravec to me. I knew Moravec had won the Pulitzer, but I must admit I'd never heard a note of his music. I listened, I loved it, I ran it past some other musicians whose opinions I trust. They loved it, so I invited Paul to write something for Santa Fe. Paul informed us he'd be working with Terry Teachout. The idea they initially proposed, I believe, was *Moby Dick*. I think they instantly saw the horror on my face. So many composers today write operas on very boring subjects. Unless you start with something really grippingly theatrical, why bother? They then came back with *The Letter*, and I definitely smiled. *The Letter* has drama, suspense, infidelity - everything you could possibly want for an opera."

Letter librettist Teachout and composer Moravec

© Robert Godwin 2009

Just to complete the behind-the-scenes symmetry, Charles MacKay arrived at Santa Fe as Gaddes's

successor, direct from his own twenty-three-year tenure at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, where he'd also succeeded Gaddes. Moreover, it was MacKay who'd backed first Colin Graham and then James Robinson in the pursuit of a reduced *Ghosts of Versailles*.

The key to that pursuit was persuading John Corigliano to provide a new orchestration. It is the daunting orchestra size originally required for Corigliano's score, not any inherent gigantism dictated by the libretto itself, that has legislated against reviving *Ghosts*. In fact, a look at the original Met production on videocassette reveals an opera that, despite its elephantine aspect, actually contains a high quotient of truly intimate scenes, however gorgeously inflated everything surrounding them may be.

"You can't blame anybody who has the Met's endless resources for using them," Robinson observes, "but the really big scenes in *Ghosts* actually are quite small in duration. We counted. All told, they take up about sixteen minutes in an opera that runs nearly three hours.

"We had the same revelation when we took on *Nixon in China* here in 2004," Robinson continues. "Again, the original production [directed by Peter Sellars] was rightly perceived as a huge, lavish thing, and again, when we looked the opera over, we found it wasn't really *such* a big show at all."

A difficult-to-reconcile contradiction begins to emerge here. Opera companies - especially the biggest houses - have long believed larger-than-life "events" are needed in order to sell new operas to a public that is at best desensitized and at worst disinterested. As a result they have been

prone to pump up musically modest works with showy (though often ingenious) scenery and staging. This inflation, of course, costs money - money that for a while was available in abundance but is no longer. Commissioning new works on a smaller scale, such as *The Letter*, saves money while also helping to secure future productions. But it lengthens the odds of capturing a wider audience.

"Yes, sadly, I think it may," concurs Gaddes. "But it's worth the tradeoff - now more than ever."

"We will have to be really creative in the future about how we conceive new pieces," adds Robinson. "No one size fits all. I've been telling composers for a while now to frontload these types of concerns into their work. Write two versions of your new opera - a smaller size and then a larger-size. 'But I don't want my opera to be a chamber opera,' they tell me. 'Do it right,' I tell them, 'and it won't be.'" □

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

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