

Opera Production in Ireland: No Place for Politics?

ÁINE SHEIL

Introduction: on the non-perception of politics

A Russian forest, suggested not by trees but by industrial pipes; an expansive wasteland interrupted by the hulk of a rusting ship; poor villagers eking out a living precariously; a tsar in nineteenth-century military wear addressing subjects in contemporary costumes: these were some of the elements in a recent Irish opera production that demonstrated interpretative complexity and critical reflection. The production in question was Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Snow Maiden*, directed by John Fulljames, and the occasion was the inauguration at the Wexford Opera Festival in October 2008 of Ireland's first purpose-built opera house. The choice of opera was apt in one sense at least: based on Russian fairy tales about the arrival of spring, the story of the Snow Maiden resembles those about mermaids or water sprites who sacrifice themselves for the love of a man (Rimsky-Korsakov's character melts as she experiences love), but the emphasis in this particular work is on the passing of the seasons. Certainly there was a symbolism in that, as one Wexford era gave way to the next.

Against a background of freely flowing champagne and audience members in full evening dress, an evening of some subtle commentary unfolded. As the villagers of the opera bore the hardships of a prolonged winter, the tsar reclined in a steaming bath. Fulljames and his designer, Dick Bird, had chosen a contemporary setting, and the anachronism of the tsar suggested nostalgia on the part of the suffering poor rather than direct resentment. The outsider Mizgir, a rich businessman, provided a much sharper focus for critique. Every inch the modern oligarch, he surrounded himself initially with threatening henchmen in leather coats, signing contracts as he went. Distributing money carelessly among the villagers, he appeared to buy himself a wife, generating excited approval until his rejection of Kupava, the new wife, in favour of Snow Maiden. As his feelings for Snow Maiden developed, the outer trappings of his

* With thanks to Christopher Morris for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this text. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences, which allowed me to carry out postdoctoral research from 2006 to 2008 on opera in Ireland.

wealth (including the henchmen) disappeared, and by the time Snow Maiden was finally ready to return his feelings he appeared bereft of all his dubiously acquired riches. This was a riches to rags story, with Mizgir's stature growing as his materialism diminished. Fairy-tale elements and insensitive industrialization were layered on top of one another, and festive chorus and dance numbers never entirely obscured the theme of social inequity.



Illustration 1. *The Snow Maiden*, Wexford Festival Opera (October 2008): directed by John Fulljames, designs by Dick Bird, lighting by Paul Keogan; with Irina Samoylova as Snow Maiden (far left), Igor Tarasov as Mizgir (centre) and Lina Tetrushvili as Kupava (centre). Photo: Patrick Redmond, reproduced courtesy of Wexford Festival Opera.

Perhaps the production was somewhat ahead of the mood of the times, for Fulljames's staging was not read by many critics in political terms. Writing in *The Independent*, Michael Church noted the overtones of 'ecological disaster' but reassured

his readers that 'it still feels like a fairy tale...thanks to some superb performances'.¹ In *The Independent on Sunday*, Anna Picard remarked that the 'production subtly underlines the severity of the winter that Russian opera's ubiquitous jolly peasants must endure',² but she did not pursue her observation to the full. There were few other signs that the production had caused critics to reflect upon the values of contemporary Russia or, more broadly, upon indiscriminate industrialism or capitalist culture. None of the reviewers neglected to mention the industrialized contemporary setting, but this was judged predominantly as a question of aesthetic style or, as Michael Dervan put it in *The Irish Times*, as 'an exercise in tongue-in-cheek inventiveness'.³

This article will explore how the non-perception of politics on the part of these critics is, in a certain sense, justified by Irish opera practice. Within the field of Irish opera production, the interpretative work of stage directors seldom challenges Irish social norms or provokes audiences by questioning or even drawing attention to popular values. Irish companies rarely see opera as a vehicle for clear ideological statements, with the result that stagings often shy away from the political potential of opera texts. This potential for political criticism or complacency is indeed present at all stages in the opera cycle (composition, production, performance and reception), and it will be explored shortly, as will Irish opera's tendency to support rather than question the political and social status quo. Three case studies will illustrate different levels of engagement with politics in recent Irish opera productions: one of these (Opera Theatre Company's *Orlando*) shows, exceptionally, how seemingly apolitical material can become a vehicle for political comment, while the other two (Wexford Festival Opera's *Der Silbersee* and Opera Ireland's *Dead Man Walking*) demonstrate quite the reverse. These case studies lead to the main conclusion of the article: that all Irish opera production is political, whether by design or through its complicity with existing power structures. As will be shown, even the rare moments of critical political comment within Irish opera are made possible by complicity; although compromised

¹ Michael Church, 'Wexford Festival: Snegurochka/The Mines of Sulphur/Suor Angelica, Wexford, Ireland', *The Independent*, 21 October 2008, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/classical/reviews/wexford-festival-snegurochka-the-mines-of-sulphur-suor-angelica-wexford-ireland-967546.html> (accessed 12 March 2010).

² Anna Picard, 'Snegurochka/The Mines of Sulphur/Suor Angelica/Il Signor Bruschino/Tutti in maschera, Wexford Opera Festival Ireland', *The Independent on Sunday*, 26 October 2008, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/classical/reviews/snegurochka-the-mines-of-sulphur-suor-angelica-il-signor-bruschino-tutti-in-maschera-wexford-opera-festival-ireland-973486.html> (accessed 12 March 2010).

³ Michael Dervan, 'A Maiden Voyage Through the Snow', *The Irish Times*, 18 October 2008, <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/weekend/2008/1018/1224233206649.html> (accessed 1 May 2009).

in that sense, they are nonetheless valuable moments of questioning that point towards a more reflective and politically responsible opera practice. This argument presupposes, however, that opera production can convey meaningful content, and that directorial interpretation matters to, and can be read by, opera audiences. These ideas are by no means uncontested within opera scholarship, so before an analysis of the case studies can proceed, some qualifying remarks on opera production and meaning are needed.

Opera production and meaning

When it comes to opera on stage, the search for meaning, let alone political meaning, is contentious. James Treadwell has argued that ‘our sense of the meaning of a production is likely to be hugely affected by its stylistic surface’ and that ‘it is possible that audiences are simply more likely to think about theatrical style than meaning’.⁴ The reviews of *The Snow Maiden* mentioned above would appear to bear this out, yet it is difficult to accept Treadwell’s assertion that ‘operatic theatre always has a non-referential aspect, a purely aesthetic element in which its constituent objects appear essentially as themselves as well as carriers of some more abstract meaning’.⁵ True, the complexities of staging opera and realizing a production may well render a director’s interpretation illegible; and true, the individual audience member is free to assimilate or ignore the director’s ideas; but can any element of a production remain entirely abstract and free of extra-theatrical associations? Can we experience objects as ‘essentially...themselves’, or do we not judge them on the basis of experiences gained outside the opera house as well as inside? As Marvin Carlson notes, ‘performance and performativity, in whatever field they are utilized, are always involved with a sense of doubleness, of the repetition of some pattern of action or mode of being in the world already in existence’.⁶ The semiotician Keir Elam draws an even more explicit connection between the codes we encounter at the theatre—theatrical or dramatic codes, as he calls them—and our accumulation of general knowledge. ‘We cannot leave at home the whole framework of more general cultural, ideological, ethical and epistemological principles which we apply in our extra-theatrical activities’, he argues. ‘On the

⁴ James Treadwell, ‘Reading and Staging Again’, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 10/2 (1998), 205–20: 215.

⁵ As note 4: 216.

⁶ Marvin A. Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, second edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 80.

contrary, the performance will inevitably make continual appeal to our general understanding of the world.⁷

Treadwell's desire to isolate production elements from the outside world is unconvincing, and is also troubling from a political perspective. Even if it were possible to stage or interpret a production on an entirely abstract basis, would that not be indicative of a value system that shuns political comment for very concrete reasons? This, however, is not one of Treadwell's concerns: rather, he sets out to question director-centred hermeneutics and what he views as value judgements based on academic rather than theatrical factors. His arguments are a response to an article by David J. Levin, 'Reading a Staging/Staging a Reading' (1997),⁸ which makes the case for critical assessment of opera production—assessment that would read the opera director's 'reading' of a work and evaluate it as strong or weak. In his recent book *Unsettling Opera* (2007), Levin elaborates on these categories:

A strong reading is surprising, illuminating previously invisible points in the text and thus asserting some distance from prevailing and predictable accounts. A weak reading fails to do so, tending instead to embrace the prevailing understanding of the work's meaning, seeking to reproduce the work's prevailing aesthetic identity, and often presenting itself as a nonreading, one that does not consciously venture an interpretation but instead merely seeks to present the work in its most familiar form.⁹

Further qualification follows, when Levin notes that traditional-looking productions are not necessarily weak, and that seemingly novel stagings are not automatically strong. For him, the nub of the matter lies in the maximization of meaning—meaning that takes account of what he terms the 'polylogic' of opera, i.e., the art form's multiple and 'unsettled' signification systems.¹⁰

Although *Unsettling Opera* is very much concerned with critical opera production, it is not primarily about politics in concept or in practice. Indeed, if Levin's evaluation criteria are adopted—and there are few clear-cut alternatives within existing literature

⁷ Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Methuen, 1980), 52.

⁸ David J. Levin, 'Reading a Staging/Staging a Reading', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 9/1 (1997), 47–71.

⁹ David J. Levin, *Unsettling Opera* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 45–6. Levin's remarks on nonreadings and directorial self-effacement echo a comment made as early as 1968 by the theatre director Peter Brook: 'When I hear a director speaking glibly of serving the author, of letting a play speak for itself, my suspicions are aroused.... If you just let a play speak, it may not make a sound. If what you want is for the play to be heard, then you must conjure its sound from it.' Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 43.

¹⁰ Levin, *Unsettling Opera*, 30.

on opera production—any characterization of Wexford Festival Opera’s *Snow Maiden* as political could immediately be dismissed as reductive. Surely to concentrate on politics at the expense of ‘polylogic’ is to ignore the inherent richness of staged opera and to deny the possibility of non-political signification or style? Indeed, why not simply call *The Snow Maiden* a ‘strong’ production, since it illuminated Rimsky-Korsakov’s work in ways that were unexpected and arresting enough to divide critical opinion neatly?¹¹

Opera, politics and Regietheater

The answer is that politics shape all opera production, and must therefore be a matter of concern. Politics, defined very simply as the allocation of resources on the basis of policy, are what make staged interpretations possible (if not necessarily legible). Without the political decision to spend money on opera, no opera can take place. This applies as much to privately sponsored productions as to state-funded work, since the allocation of resources involves an expression of values and is therefore an exercise of private or public politics. This is, however, just one way in which opera can be deemed political. Anthony Arblaster’s *Viva la libertà!: Politics in Opera* (1992) and John Bokina’s *Opera and Politics: From Monteverdi to Henze* (1997) examine a selection of texts from the opera canon, locating political content in the output of composers and librettists. Other commentators have followed suit, investigating written works not just from the perspective of state, nation and rulers but also through the lens of feminism, gender studies, queer theory and identity politics. That the written texts of opera are rich repositories of large-scale and domestic political material appears to be widely accepted, but analysis of politics within opera production is not as widespread or self-evident in comparison. Yet it is precisely in performance that the potential politics of the written text are realized, ignored or creatively adjusted. A director’s decision to respond to or suppress the apparent politics of the text results in a political staging, whether this process is overt or self-effacing. And the very choice to stage a particular work and not another is a display of political decision-making on the part of an institution or company. In addition to this, the presence and reaction of an audience can add another political layer to the proceedings. A particularly clear example of this occurred at the Bayreuth Festival in 1924, when the opening performance of *Die*

¹¹ For Anthony Holden, Fulljames’s work was ‘perverse [and] often vulgar’, while for Church, the production was ‘a revelatory take on this venerable work’. Anthony Holden, ‘Bravo for Wexford and Romeo’, *The Observer*, 26 October 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/oct/26/wexford-opera-festival> (accessed 12 March 2010). Church, as note 1.

Meistersinger von Nürnberg was greeted with a spontaneous and complete rendition of the *Deutschlandlied* on the part of the audience.

The potential of the opera stage/auditorium as an arena for political comment, propaganda or ideological community-building has long been recognized. During the Third Reich, the official National Socialist staging of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* included avenues of Nazi-style banners in the final scene, and massed choruses resembled the huge political rallies of the era. The subsequent stage history of the work in Germany has consisted of a variety of responses to this propagandistic appropriation, from Wieland Wagner's ostensibly depoliticized abstractions in post-war Bayreuth (not just a new aesthetic direction, but also a matter of urgent political expediency) to a production in the current repertory of Hamburg State Opera. First seen in 2002, this staging by Peter Konwitschny caused a major stir within the world of opera with its interpolated dialogue that interrupts the music in the final scene. When Konwitschny's Hans Sachs praises German art at the expense of foreign efforts, another character stops him to say that his sentiments are no longer acceptable. The music grinds to a halt, a spoken debate about nationalism follows and eventually the conductor intervenes in order to continue with Wagner's score. Act III takes place not in a festival meadow but against the ruins of Nuremberg after World War II. This anachronistic take on *Die Meistersinger* is a particularly clear case of political opera production, but is also a striking example of *Regietheater*, or 'director's theatre': it reintroduces a sense of urgency and contemporaneity to the work through self-reflexive layers of history and by using present-day theatrical means. It is also what Levin might describe as a 'strong' production, since its dramaturgy is based on a considered, critical reading of Wagner's text, and its methodology—in particular the rupturing of the musical score in such a pointed way—is audacious.

It is no coincidence that a German production illustrates so well political intervention on the part of a director, for Germany is inextricably linked with the very idea of *Regietheater*. Marvin Carlson has described the term *Regietheater* as 'one of the most familiar critical terms in German theatrical discourse',¹² and this wide usage has ensured a variety of opinions on what precisely it denotes. There is, however, general agreement that *Regietheater* is a form of theatre in which the stage director interprets visibly, leaving a definite artistic stamp on a production. Carlson suggests that this development can be traced as far back as Goethe, who served as Director of the Weimar Court Theatre from 1791 to 1817, during which time a distinct style of acting

¹² Marvin A. Carlson, *Theatre is More Beautiful than War: German Stage Directing in the Late Twentieth Century* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), x.

was developed.¹³ Others trace *Regietheater* to the early part of the twentieth century, in particular to the innovations in Berlin and Vienna of theatre director Max Reinhardt; indeed, Nicholas Payne, former Director of the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, picks Max Reinhardt's work on the premiere of Strauss's *Rosenkavalier* (1911) as the first manifestation of the 'cult of the theatre director in opera'.¹⁴ Within the historiography of opera direction, the Kroll Opera in Berlin (1927–31) is often depicted as an early powerhouse of innovative and ultimately political staging, but particular attention is paid to the post-war work of Wieland Wagner, who broke with pre-war naturalist traditions and introduced abstract staging to the Bayreuth Festival. Patrice Chéreau's production of the centennial *Ring* at Bayreuth in 1976 is often singled out as a milestone in critical opera production, but East German directors such as Joachim Herz, Harry Kupfer and Götz Friedrich also contributed significantly to politically informed opera of the 1960s, 70s and 80s. These decades were, in fact, the heyday of *Regietheater*, because, as Carlson notes, the first generation of post-war theatre directors gave way to a second generation in the early 1970s. A new move towards leftist political comment within German theatre and opera direction took place, Carlson remarks, 'against the background of the street demonstrations, the sit-ins, and the protests of this turbulent era'.¹⁵ Udo Bermbach has argued that Patrice Chéreau's *Ring* grew out of the revolutionary spirit of 1968 and the widespread questioning of bourgeois aesthetics and values at that time, and he believes that the most significant productions in the meantime have all engaged with the important political conversations of their day. He laments the growing apoliticism of opera production in Germany, and notes that industrialization/globalization appears to many to have triumphed over politics and political *Regietheater*.¹⁶ Payne, who is less concerned with the political content of specific opera productions, argues that '*Regietheater* is still the

¹³ As note 12.

¹⁴ Nicholas Payne, 'Opera in the Marketplace', in Mervyn Cooke (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 306–20: 316.

¹⁵ Carlson, *Theatre is More Beautiful than War*, xii.

¹⁶ Udo Bermbach, 'Zeitströmungen und ästhetische Produktion: Bemerkungen zum Zusammenhang von Politik, Gesellschaft und Inszenierungskonzepten', in Robert Sollich, Clemens Risi, Sebastian Reus and Stephan Jöris (eds), *Angst von der Zerstörung: Der Meister Künste zwischen Archiv und Erneuerung* (Berlin: Verlag Theater der Zeit, 2008), 161–73. Bermbach's observations on globalization and the perceived impotence of politics were made before the current recession gave rise to a wave of political intervention in industrial and banking matters.

dominant influence in Germany and in many of its adjacent countries', but acknowledges that 'the further away from this epicentre, the greater the scepticism'.¹⁷

How far from the epicentre of *Regietheater* is Irish opera? Payne's neat formulation is probably based on the contrast between opera in Germany and opera in the USA,¹⁸ but the Irish opera stage is also some distance from the home of director's opera. The example of *Snow Maiden* shows that critical opera production is not unknown in Ireland, but overt political comment on the part of opera directors remains the exception rather than the rule.

Opera Theatre Company: *Orlando* (2007)

One such exception is Opera Theatre Company's *Orlando* from 2007, a production by the company's Artistic Director, Annilese Miskimmon. Based on Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* and first performed in 1733, Handel's opera is not time-specific and was easily transposed to the contemporary military setting of this production. Orlando, a soldier, is in love with Angelica. In his absence Angelica has fallen for Medoro, who has also attracted the amorous (but unrequited) attentions of Dorinda. Zoroastro, a figure of authority, urges Orlando to return to battle, but Orlando discovers that Angelica is in love with Medoro. He loses his reason and attempts to kill her. In Handel's work, Zoroastro is described as a magician, Angelica as the Queen of Cathay, Medoro as an African prince, and Dorinda as a shepherdess. Miskimmon and her designer Simon Holdsworth depart from these designations, and in their production Orlando, Angelica, Medoro and Dorinda become lowly pawns in a larger military picture. Zoroastro is cast as a controlling military doctor, but he too is ultimately a conduit for a higher and insidious force.

Act I opens in a utilitarian hospital ward, and the modest social status of the younger characters quickly emerges through their high street-style costumes. Angelica stands out for her dolled-up appearance, complete with outrageous pink nails and shoes. Throughout the opera she performs the role of the woman without agency—a lack of agency that can indeed be observed in various forms in all characters. A certain tension develops between the ordinariness of the characters as presented in this production and the virtuosic high-flown sentiments of the roles—a tension that is

¹⁷ As note 14.

¹⁸ As Levin has pointed out several times, American opera has been slow to adopt the critical ambitions of its German counterpart. Recently, however, he sees cause for optimism: the widespread introduction of surtitles to American opera houses has, he argues, created an interpretative imperative that cannot easily be ignored. *Unsettling Opera*, 49–52.

ultimately fruitful, for it prevents the characterization from becoming stereotypical or banal. Act II moves the action to a realm suggestive of hallucination, in which Orlando's mental disintegration can convincingly unfold. Giant poppies, naturalist in detail but fantasy-like in size, are arranged around a park bench. Angelica's unfaithfulness emerges in an exchange between Orlando and Dorinda; stillness precedes the central vengeance aria, but as Orlando subsequently brandishes a knife, a rifle and a pistol, a central theme of the production becomes apparent: that soldiers trained to kill are liable to carry their military experiences over into domestic life.



Illustration 2. *Orlando*, Opera Theatre Company (September 2007): directed by Annilese Miskimmon, designs by Simon Holdsworth; with Jonathan Best as Zoroastro (left) and William Towers as Orlando (right). Photo: Patrick Redmond, reproduced courtesy of Opera Theatre Company.

Act III returns us to the military ward, this time with giant poppies signalling Orlando's continued mental disarray. After a brutal attempt on Angelica's life, Orlando is sedated by injection. At this point it seems that oblivion—whether voluntary or involuntary—is the only way out for tormented soldiers. The debilitating effects of military life are underlined once more at the end of the production: Medoro appears in

Opera Production in Ireland: No Place for Politics?

military uniform with Angelica at his side, and the story seems set to repeat itself. Orlando is seen against a field of poppies, a visual reminder of world war and the war-like conditions that persist in present-day Afghanistan. He and Medoro are thus portrayed as just two of many ill-used soldiers.



Illustration 3. *Orlando*, Opera Theatre Company (September 2007): directed by Annilese Miskimmon, designs by Simon Holdsworth; with Natasha Jouhl as Angelica (left) and William Towers as Orlando (right). Photo: Patrick Redmond, reproduced courtesy of Opera Theatre Company.

This was *Regietheater* with a clearly anti-militarist position. The production was internally consistent—it made dramatic sense on its own terms—and it had something to say about the deployment of soldiers and the related oppression of weaker members of society. It was, in other words, a post-*Wozzeck* reading of *Orlando*—an instance of opera informing opera and of fairy tale resonating with political observation. And while the foreign policies of the Bush era were clearly in the production’s sights, the contemporary setting gained wider relevance through the association of the poppy with World War I. The specifics of the staging lent themselves to general reflection, and this in turn allowed an appreciation of the work’s openness and mutability.

Opera Ireland: *Dead Man Walking* (2007)

Another recent Irish opera production involving hard social realities worked on an entirely different basis: Opera Ireland's 2007 version of *Dead Man Walking* aligned plot and staging in a neatly packaged and mostly naturalist manner, thus emphasizing confluence rather than 'polylogic'. Directed by Thomas de Mallet Burgess and designed by Paul Keogan, the production drew little attention to itself as a political interpretation, functioning instead as a self-effacing vehicle for a relatively new work. *Dead Man Walking* is by the American composer Jake Heggie and playwright Terrence McNally; it had its premiere in San Francisco in 2000, and has been staged in the meantime by several American and a number of European opera houses. It is based on the book *Dead Man Walking* (1994) by Sister Helen Prejean, which is both autobiography and documentation of Prejean's long struggle against the death penalty in the USA.¹⁹

The opera opens with a rape and murder scene and closes with the execution of the self-confessed murderer. It tells of Prejean's contact with the condemned prisoner, though not about her subsequent campaign against capital punishment. The overt political content of the opera is slight in comparison with that of the book, which goes far beyond the fate of one prisoner to deal with the American system of capital punishment and the class and race politics associated with it. In a programme note published by Opera Ireland in 2007, Prejean suggests that the opera is not so much about the death penalty as about human redemption and forgiveness. This does not dismay the veteran campaigner: she argues that the opera's theme 'is bigger and deeper than the question of the death penalty. It helps us journey into the deepest places of our hearts where we struggle with hurts and forgiveness, with guilt for our failings and the need for redemption'.²⁰ In her opinion, the opera invites reflection on the part of the audience:

In the prologue everyone is witness to an unspeakable crime and everyone knows who did it, and then when we meet him, brash and unremorseful, we want to see him executed for his crime. There is no question as to guilt or innocence, so all the energy of the audience gathers around the outrage we feel about the crime and wanting to see 'justice' done. But when the killer's mother begins to sing before the Board of Pardons for her son's life, we are all brought

¹⁹ Helen Prejean, *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States* (London: Fount, 1994). Prejean's book also provided the basis for the film *Dead Man Walking* (1995).

²⁰ Opera Ireland winter season programme booklet for *Turandot* and *Dead Man Walking* (2007), 47.

Opera Production in Ireland: No Place for Politics?

into a terrible moral dilemma: by killing the killer are we achieving 'justice' or are we creating another victimised family?²¹

That Prejean's argument is framed in terms of morality rather than politics is not entirely surprising, but her assumption of an initial vengeful consensus on the part of the audience is significant. It implies an audience in an unthinking state, or a group mentality that may just switch from one position (uncritical support for the death penalty) to another (rejection of the death penalty), not on the basis of individual intellectual engagement, but because of an emotional moment that should touch everyone. The reflection she envisages does not allow for a multiplicity of positions at the outset, and her insistence on redemption rather than policy negates the possibility that the opera could play a meaningful role in her political campaign.



Illustration 4. *Dead Man Walking*, Opera Ireland (November 2007): directed by Thomas de Mallet Burgess, sets and lighting by Paul Keogan, costumes by Joan O'Clery; with Charlotte Hellekant as Sister Helen (centre). Photo: Patrick Redmond, reproduced courtesy of Opera Ireland.

²¹ As note 20.

Prejean's conviction that *Dead Man Walking* 'brings us into the deepest recesses of our own hearts'²² is hardly a universal truth, since opera on stage can often disappoint and frustrate. Indeed the work as seen in this production was deeply disappointing: above all, the score drained the performance of most of the expected tension, providing instead a patchwork of idiomatically varied but constantly bland soundscapes that rarely produced any notable sense of urgency. Paul Keogan's set placed some of the performances upstage at a significant remove, blunting in particular the energy of the Death Row scene in Act I. Here, the caged and angry inmates should have had a particularly imposing effect, but they were distant, clad in very neutral jeans and white t-shirts and apologetic in tone and gesture.

Whether intentionally or not, this scene encapsulated the transformation of *Dead Man Walking* into opera: the structural layers of the set reproduced the effect of the proscenium arch, placing the prisoners on show and Sister Helen and the Warden in the role of audience. The overall effect was, however, surprisingly muted, and the potential for self-reflexivity was lost. In other words, neither that section of the performance (the representation of prisoners trading insults and bad language) nor the performativity of the moment (the traces of opera culture in that representation) was conveyed persuasively. Certainly there was no invitation to the audience to see themselves as an extension of a disciplinary system that puts people behind bars.

Perhaps the most effective part of the production came in the execution scene, which achieved a level of tension missing elsewhere in the production.²³ The prisoner was strapped into a large white chair and lowered into a horizontal position; television screens overhead showed his face as he writhed and eventually was still. This was a silent sequence, apart from electronic beeping: a dramatic ploy within the context of an opera, but also an unfortunate reflection on the music as a whole. Why was this material made into an opera? Should it not have stayed in book form, where statistics and political nuances contributed to a compelling case against the American justice system? The opera concentrates on the story of one prisoner—a composite character drawn from several strands in the book—and presents this story without the benefit of political context or the type of details with which existing policy could be challenged. Politically speaking it is reductive, and a director given the task of staging it must

²² As note 20.

²³ That this section of the production proved most dramatic is hardly coincidence, for, as performance-studies specialist Dwight Conquergood has pointed out, contemporary American execution rituals are specifically formulated to produce suspense, drama and a sense of performance. See Dwight Conquergood, 'Lethal Theatre: Performance, Punishment, and the Death Penalty', *Theatre Journal*, 54/3 (October 2002), 339–67.

Opera Production in Ireland: No Place for Politics?

decide whether to re-insert the politics or to step backwards and avoid any overt signs of ideological intervention.

Opera Ireland's production was self-consciously political in one sense only: it allied itself directly with Amnesty International, even setting aside a percentage of box office sales for the organization. In this sense it signalled a clear stance against capital punishment. There was, however, no sense of grappling with a divisive issue, for the argument against the death penalty has long been won in Ireland. A performance in Dublin is less likely to provoke moral dilemma than a performance in the USA—unless the issues in the opera are made immediate and urgent by some added commentary on the part of a director. In other words, even if we accept the watered-down politics of the opera (as compared with the book), we should recognize that directorial translation and critical interpretation are needed in order to achieve the 'dilemma' effect. What Opera Ireland's production badly needed was the type of theatrical footnotes envisaged by Brecht in his notes to *Die Dreigroschenoper*:

this way of subordinating everything to a single idea, this passion for propelling the spectator along a single track where he can look neither right nor left, up nor down, is something that the new school of play-writing must reject. Footnotes, and the habit of turning back in order to check a point, need to be introduced into play-writing too.²⁴

Instead of that, Opera Ireland's *Dead Man Walking* presented 'pre-digested' politics: by eschewing discernible added layers of criticism, the staging did not invite the audience to digest anything new or to contemplate the raw politics of class and race that lie beyond the opera's frame.

Wexford Festival Opera: *Der Silbersee* (2007)

Another recent Irish production—Wexford Festival Opera's *Der Silbersee* (2007)—presented yet another type of unrealized political potential. Even by Wexford's adventurous programming standards, the work is unusual fare for an opera company. *Der Silbersee* (*The Silver Lake*) is a play with music: a collaboration between Kurt Weill and Germany's leading expressionist playwright, Georg Kaiser. Published as a 'Wintermärchen' ('winter's fairytale'—surely a tribute to Heinrich Heine's political satire *Deutschland: Ein Wintermärchen*), *Der Silbersee* is a piece between genres, as Weill once described it to his publisher. With a running time of approximately three hours, only 65–70 minutes are made up of Weill's music.

²⁴ John Willett (ed. and trans.), *Brecht On Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 44.

Among the fairytale elements of the work are the silver lake of the title, which freezes over at the end despite spring having arrived, and the villain Frau von Luber, who seizes ownership of a castle from the lottery winner Olim. In his earlier role as a policeman, Olim shoots Severin, a poor outcast who raids a grocery shop out of hunger and desperation. After discovering that Severin has only stolen a pineapple, Olim suffers a crisis of conscience and decides to devote his lottery gains to improving Severin's life. The crippled Severin is taken to live with Olim in his castle but remains bitter and interested only in revenge until Frau von Luber's niece Fennimore brings about reconciliation between the two. Outwitted by the ruthless aristocrat-turned-housekeeper Frau von Luber, Olim and Severin are thrown out of the castle. Having decided to drown themselves in the Silver Lake, they discover that it has frozen over, as if to offer a means of escape as well as hope. This hope is part of an unmistakably political commentary that runs through the work: Fennimore sings a ballad that denounces tyranny; theft by the poor is represented as understandable; the aristocracy (as personified by Frau von Luber) will stop at nothing to restore its wealth; and the forces of order are inhumane and draconian. As a police colleague of Olim pronounces, the poor should be rounded up and put in concentration camps.

This reference to concentration camps is chilling in a piece first seen weeks after Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in 1933. Indeed the second performance in Magdeburg was disrupted by Nazi protesters, who regarded *Der Silbersee* as a tendentious, Bolshevik piece. As a Jew, Weill had much to fear from the National Socialist regime, especially when the Reichstag burned down only days after the *Silbersee* premieres. Performances of the piece were abandoned, Weill's works were subsequently banned and the composer went into exile, first in France and later in America. Kaiser fared little better; in 1933 he was expelled from the Prussian Academy of Arts and Sciences, and in 1938 he went into exile in Switzerland. *Der Silbersee* slipped into obscurity and was not performed again in Germany during the authors' lifetimes. Productions in the meantime have been infrequent, not least because of the hybrid nature of the work. Although the piece appears to require a cast of singing actors, it also involves a full orchestra, and the musical demands are many. Solutions have involved a reduced orchestration and score; concert versions with musical numbers linked by narrations and semi-staged dialogue; and free adaptations with extra music.

The 2007 Wexford *Silbersee* was performed in English by a cast of singers and singing actors. The translation was by Rory Bremner, the well known political satirist and translator of Brecht among other authors. Bremner originally translated *Der Silbersee* for a production in London in 1999, but he revised his work for Wexford. One clear moment of topicality came in a pointed reference to maturing SSIA's, the government savings scheme that was introduced in the early 2000s with the aim of dampening Irish inflation rates. With a state top-up of 25% on all money saved, the

scheme proved highly popular and led to a spending bonanza when the accounts began to mature in 2006. Opposition politicians were quick to criticize the scheme, no doubt fearing that the generosity of the government would help decide the outcome of the general election in 2007 (the ruling Fianna Fáil party was indeed returned to power that year).²⁵ The reference to SSIAAs won an appreciative laugh from the Wexford audience (many of whom, it can be assumed, were beneficiaries of the scheme), but other attempts at comedy throughout the evening were received less enthusiastically.

And yet the production tried very hard to be comic. The director, Keith Warner, settled for a pantomime-style send-up of the Kaiser-Weill text, robbing *Der Silbersee* of most of its political potential. The aristocratic Frau von Luber, played by soap-opera actress Anita Dobson, became a glamorous wicked witch akin to Disney's Cruella de Vil. She and her sidekick, Baron von Laur, were archetypal comic villains, reflecting nothing of the present and nothing of the politics of Weill and Kaiser's Germany.

These politics were explored in a programme note by Stephen Hinton, who noted Andreas Hauff's reading of the work, in which 'Olim and Severin stand for the Social Democrats and Communists respectively, fatally divided in their socio-political interests'.²⁶ This lack of unity on the left has often been implicated in the rise of the National Socialists, but the historian Brendan Simms accuses Weill and Kaiser of laying blame at the wrong door. In an extended review of the Wexford production, Simms argues that 'the real enemy in 1933 were not the cardboard aristocrats of *Silbersee*, but Hitler's rather more formidable Nazis, who are ignored throughout. In that sense...Weill's *Silbersee* remains trapped in the early twentieth century, and struggles to appeal to a wider audience'.²⁷ According to Hinton, however, the piece retains the potential to transcend the circumstances of its creation: he argues that 'the "purely human" appeal strengthened the immediately political one'.²⁸

²⁵ In a Dáil (parliament) debate on 6 May 2004 the opposition Finance spokesperson Richard Bruton argued that 'every economic expert around the city estimates that approximately €17 billion will be released in a 12-month period, which has the potential to dramatically destabilise the economy if it is spent on imports of yachts and BMWs'. Bruton sharply criticized the then Minister for Finance Charlie McCreevy and sought assurances 'that we will not see a repeat of what happened in the lead up to the last general election when the Government had a huge spree followed by a massive hangover [high inflation] for which the ordinary person had to pay'. <http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/D/0585/D.0585.200405060015.html> (accessed 12 March 2010).

²⁶ Stephen Hinton, 'Topical Reflections on Silver Lake', in Wexford Festival Opera programme book (2007), 37.

²⁷ See <http://www.socialaffairsunit.org.uk/blog/archives/001522.php> (accessed 12 March 2010).

²⁸ Hinton, 37.



Illustration 5. *Der Silbersee*, Wexford Festival Opera (May 2007): directed by Keith Warner, designs by Jason Southgate, lighting by Paul Keogan; with Anita Dobson as Frau von Luber. Photo: Derek Speirs, reproduced courtesy of Wexford Festival Opera.



Illustration 6. *Der Silbersee*, Wexford Festival Opera (May 2007): directed by Keith Warner, designs by Jason Southgate, lighting by Paul Keogan; with Jeremy Finch as Baron Laur (left) and Anita Dobson as Frau von Luber (right). Photo: Derek Speirs, reproduced courtesy of Wexford Festival Opera.

Whether or not one judges the politics of *Der Silbersee* passé or secondary, directorial choices undoubtedly have a bearing on an audience's perception of the piece. The work's three simultaneous premieres in Leipzig, Magdeburg and Erfurt on 18 February 1933 are a case in point: these were self-contained productions, each with its own director, designer and critical reception (the Leipzig director was Detlef Sierck, who later made a career in Hollywood as the film director Douglas Sirk).²⁹ As Ulrike Zitzlsperger has pointed out, the Leipzig version apparently played up the comedic elements, with a comic actor in the role of Olim. She ventures a link between this light approach and the apparent lack of interruption during the performances there. The

²⁹ This multiple-opening approach was not unusual, at least for Kaiser: he was adept at maintaining his profile through such events, and had achieved nine simultaneous openings for his play *Zweimal Oliver* (1926) and no fewer than sixteen for *Mississippi* (1930).

Magdeburg production may have been darker, she suggests, with the result that it drew criticism from nationalists and was cancelled soon afterwards.³⁰

Is comedy an inherently conservative form of theatre? Does laughter serve to uphold the ‘natural’ order of things rather than to challenge or even change it? Richard Schechner argues that ‘laughter is both aggressive and aggregating...[it] presupposes, even creates, a “we” that opposes a “them”’.³¹ His comment implies a kind of complacency—the lack of self-criticism that goes along with the politics of inclusion and exclusion. Certainly subversive comedy exists, but, in the case of *Der Silbersee*, laughter is almost bound to have the effect of directing audiences *away* from the piece’s critical content. This is as true of the Wexford production as of the Leipzig premiere; the difference is that a light production today lacks the original historical context—the everyday world of 1933—with the result that it becomes doubly unmoored. The slapstick in the Wexford production appeared as a suppression of *Der Silbersee*’s earnest social commentary—there was brittle theatricality (knowing use of stock theatrical characters and familiar physical gestures), but little evidence of a sustained commentary on the piece or on the basis of the piece. Perhaps, then, this was what Treadwell might call style over meaning? And yet it is perfectly possible to imagine a ‘strong’, even contemporary, reading of *Der Silbersee*. Despite Simms’ argument that the politics of the piece belong to a bygone era, there are significant resonances in the inequalities between the characters and Frau von Luber’s and Baron von Laur’s extravagant sense of entitlement. Simms himself points to the ironic congruity between *Der Silbersee* and the temporary home of the 2007 Wexford festival at Johnstown Castle—both feature a lake and a castle—and this could very well have been the basis for political self-reflection within the production.

Irish opera practice: the politics of culinary opera

That this type of self-reflection was not a feature of Wexford’s *Silbersee* is more typical of Irish opera practice than a production such as *Orlando* or even *Dead Man Walking*. Brecht’s idea of culinary opera—the type of opera that oils the wheels of the opera industry rather than challenging the audience—is alive and well in Ireland, whereas incisive, critical production is a relative rarity. In part, this is because of funding

³⁰ Ulrike Zitzlsperger, ‘Caught between Two Eras: Georg Kaiser’s *The Silver Lake*’, in Frank Krause (ed.), *Georg Kaiser and Modernity* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2005), 131. Audrone B. Willeke notes that the Magdeburg theatre director and his staff lost their positions after staging *Der Silbersee*. See Audrone B. Willeke, *Georg Kaiser and the Critics* (Columbia: Camden House, 1995), 29.

³¹ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York/London: Routledge, 1988), 243.

arrangements. Whereas opera companies in continental Europe have enjoyed public subsidies of up to 90% of their budgets, opera in Ireland is considerably more exposed to box office damage.³² None of the existing companies has produced more than four or five large-scale productions a year, so if even one production fails to sell this can have a disproportionately negative effect on a company's finances. Another factor is tradition. Opera Ireland, the company that grew out of the Dublin Grand Opera Society, has its roots in Italian opera, and was even supported in the 1950s by the Italian government. For many decades the primary orientation was towards Italy rather than Germany, and even though the current Artistic Director is Swiss and has entered into co-production arrangements with regional German opera houses, radical *Regietheater* never made any great impression on the company.

Unlike civic theatre systems in German-speaking countries, opera companies in Ireland do not share permanent homes with major theatre companies. This means that Irish opera fails to connect meaningfully with Irish theatre, a situation that is reflected in the art-form-based funding mechanisms of the Arts Council of Ireland. Critical or political Irish theatre goes its own way, leaving few traces on the opera landscape.³³ But on rare occasions, opera, theatre and politics do collide in Ireland. In 2006, Peter Sellars gave a keynote address entitled 'Art as Moral Action' at a Theatre Forum Conference in Limerick. Sellars is one of the foremost of political opera directors and something of a rarity within the world of American opera direction. He views opera not just as a vehicle for criticism of contemporary western values, but also as a force for change. He is active as a theatre director, but sees opera as particularly suited to his purposes:

³² In 'Opera in the Marketplace', Payne gives figures of 90% subsidy for Netherlands Opera, 70–80% for many companies in Germany, France and Italy and 30–50% for British companies (Payne, 311). As Director of Opera Europa, a pan-European forum for professional opera companies, Payne is in a particularly good position to comment on funding patterns; his current message on the homepage of the Opera Europa website warns that previously generous levels of public subsidy are declining across Europe. <http://www.opera-europa.org/view.asp?id=55> (accessed 12 March 2010).

³³ For a more detailed comparison of the contemporary and historical roles of theatre and opera in Ireland see Áine Sheil and Joshua Edelman, 'Internationalization and the Irish State's Relationship with Theatre and Opera', in J. J. van Maanen, Andreas Kotte and Anneli Saro (eds), *Global Changes, Local Stages: How Theatre Functions in Smaller European Countries* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 146–75. In Ireland, theatre attracts more funding than opera; this inversion of typical European funding patterns is, as argued in the essay, a manifestation of spoken theatre's cultural and political capital in Ireland and a result of theatre's close association with Irish identity-formation. Opera has remained marginal to the State's cultural strategies and is thus all too easily viewed in Ireland as apolitical spectacle.

a further attraction of opera is its ironic centrality, its political clout. One is dealing in the arena of big money, the preferred (or at least obligatory) form of entertainment for heads of state and the diplomatic corps. One has an audience of 'the best people', the power elite, artists, hangers-on.... You are performing in the big theater at the center of town, across from City Hall.... You are not pacing back and forth in a picket line on the sidewalk below, you are in the boardroom engaging in direct horizontal address with a strong vertical (art, God, and beauty) to back you up.³⁴

How well does Sellars' idealistic argument translate to the Irish sphere? Over the course of its existence, Wexford Festival Opera has attracted visits by politicians from across the political spectrum, but the wider opera sector in Ireland appears to be of more interest to the business community than to politicians. Opera Ireland is sponsored by BMW, and Opera Theatre Company has a portfolio of corporate partners that includes law firms and major insurance, consultancy and development companies. Even a production such as *Orlando* was facilitated by the corporate support of KPMG (the international firm of chartered accountants and business advisors), the mission statement of which commits it to 'turning knowledge into value for the benefit of our clients...and the capital markets'.³⁵ For KPMG, the *Orlando* sponsorship was just one of its corporate social responsibility activities, and the company's executives are unlikely to have viewed the production as a radical examination of western militarism and social oppression. As sociologist Michel Peillon argues:

Most aspects of cultural activity and production are now so integrated into the post-industrial economy, either as a means of production or as a means of consumption, that the very possibility of a critical stance is suppressed or, more simply, not entertained or even imagined.... The possibility of 'negative practices', that is of practices which undermine or even subvert the established order, are now only upheld in some residual corners of the cultural field.³⁶

Of course, most of the time Irish opera is political precisely because it is culinary: more often than not, it accepts the status quo and is therefore political in its adherence to prevailing values. The art form itself militates against any boat-rocking, since it is too expensive to enjoy any real autonomy. That even a critical production such as *Orlando* is subject to this reality bears out Judith Butler's observation that 'one is, as it were, in power even as one opposes it, formed by it as one reworks it, and it is this simultaneity that is at once the condition of our partiality, the measure of our political

³⁴ Peter Sellars, 'Exits and Entrances: On Opera', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 14/1 (2004), 107–109: 108.

³⁵ <http://www.kpmg.ie/about/values.html> (accessed 12 March 2010).

³⁶ Michel Peillon, 'Culture and State in Ireland's New Economy', in Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (eds), *Reinventing Ireland. Culture, Society and the Global Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 38–53: 52.

unknowingness, and also the condition of action itself'. Butler argues that political contestation is possible, but is always forged 'from resources inevitably impure'.³⁷

Thus all opera productions are political in one sense or another, even those that could be described as 'weak' and having little to say. One could argue, therefore, that political opera production has nothing to do with *Regietheater* or the effort to create 'strong' readings. Indeed the demand for critical opera production could be said merely to transfer the authority that was once vested in the composer, work or score to the director. Perhaps, indeed, the idea of an opera production conveying a coherent political point is delusional, given that production concepts can become opaque and illegible by the time they reach an audience. One could even concur with Carlson that seemingly resistant performance that operates *within* the dominant system is deeply suspect, 'since there is no "outside" from which it can operate'.³⁸

Opera that conforms unproblematically to hegemonic values is often popular and more likely to be economically rewarding than its critical counterpart. An integral part of the opera landscape for this reason, it also forms an undifferentiated background against which the ambitions of political *Regietheater* become apparent. The performance-studies theorist Jon McKenzie has noted that 'acts become sedimented precisely through the orbit of their historical repetition and desedimented through, shall we say, "exorbitant" variations on such repetitions, variations that nonetheless also involve repetition, citation, rehearsal, and parody'.³⁹ A variation is not apparent without a yardstick, so the sedimented acts (in this case, weak opera productions) make it easier to recognize critically informed work. But none of this provides an adequate excuse for unquestioning opera stagings. Butler's point about compromise is key here: although opera cannot serve as an untainted vehicle for detailed political criticism, it can certainly use its impure resources for the purposes of political reflection. Given the resources that the staging of opera demands, this is a matter of basic responsibility and belief in the relevance of the art form. Or, to put it another way: opera should be able to play its part in a wider social discourse that includes political analysis and critical self-reflection.

³⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 241.

³⁸ 'When the very structure of the performative situation is recognized as already involved in the operations of the dominant social systems, directly oppositional performance becomes highly suspect, since there is no "outside" from which it can operate.' Marvin Carlson, 'Resistant Performance', in Lizbeth Goodman with Jane de Say (eds), *The Routledge Reader in Politics and Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 60–65: 63.

³⁹ Jon McKenzie, 'Genre Trouble: (The) Butler Did It', in Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (eds), *The Ends of Performance*, (New York and London: NYU Press, 1998), 217–35: 223.

Is opera particularly prone to sedimentation in a way that other art forms are not? The non-expanding canon and prevalence of conformist production values would appear to suggest that it is. But could the ratio of sedimented acts to exorbitant variation change? Could Ireland support fewer of the apolitical political stagings, and more of the challenging and position-taking sort? Perhaps post-Celtic-Tiger Ireland is ripe for more productions that set out to question as well as entertain. In this harsh new economic climate opera funding is set to change, and the current infrastructure will be rationalized quite radically. Whether or not this results in a new climate for critical opera production is another matter, but the prevailing mood of crisis may help to unsettle Irish opera for the better, or at least correct the ratio of questioning to complacency.

Áine Sheil

University of York