

Robert Carsen: Opera's Master of the Modern

By David Stevens, International Herald Tribune

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It is a long way from the operatic worlds of Handel and Mozart to the wild west of Buffalo Bill, but that is the range of theatrical activity that over the last decade has made Robert Carsen one of the most sought-after stage directors on the operatic scene.

His staging of Handel's "Alcina," in its first appearance in the repertory of the Paris Opera, has given that company a glorious flourish in the closing weeks of its current season.

Of course, it has not hurt that this production at the Palais Garnier has a luxurious cast headed by Renee Fleming in the title role, and with Susan Graham, the rising French star Natalie Dessay and Kathleen Kuhlmann in the other principal parts; nor that William Christie

and his ensemble Les Arts Florissants, now in their 20th season, were in the pit. Tobias Hoheisel's spacious sets and Jean Kalman's sumptuous lighting helped give Handel's remote myth of the enchantress and her magic island a convincingly contemporary expression.

Updating operatic subjects is a tricky business and by no means always successful, but Carsen has proven to be a master at such transformations. Another recent example is his staging of Verdi's "Macbeth," originally mounted for Cologne and impressively repeated in the last couple of weeks at the Grand Theatre in Geneva.

This reading could have been subtitled "skulduggery in the military-industrial complex," with the action set in a kind of bunker (or maybe the Pentagon) and with the strange choral groups of witches transformed into a squadron of charladies — as well-informed as those who clean up the messes of others always are.

"We go to the theater to see ourselves, for the emotional experience," the slight Canadian said in reference to opera in modern dress. "The feelings and actions of the characters in, say, Mozart's 'Marriage of Figaro,' are completely modern," he added, whereas the use of period costumes tends to negate that reality and make it "kind of abstract."

"We are there to learn about the people," he added, "not too much about what is going on on the stage."

Carsen, 44, was exposed to opera and other theater as an adolescent, when he was taken along on trips to New York from his native Toronto. When he was 18 he entered the Old Vic Theatre School in Bristol, England, where one of his instructors, noticing that he watched all the scenes even when he was not involved as an actor, urged him to think about directing.

This led to a long stretch of apprenticeship as an assistant stage director, notably for five years at the Glyndebourne Festival, and perhaps most bizarrely as an assistant to Ken Russell for a production of Bernd-Alois Zimmermann's "Die Soldaten," in Lyon.

In 1986, Carsen staged Mozart's "La Finta Giardiniera" at the Camden Festival in London, where one of the spectators was Hugues Gall, then the director of the Grand Theatre in Geneva and now boss of the Paris Opera. The result was that Gall gave Carsen the chances that he considers the real beginning of his career.

Gall recalled that he put Carsen in charge of a revival of Puccini's "La Boheme," and was sufficiently impressed that he suggested another revival, of Humperdinck's "Hansel und Gretel." Carsen demonstrated such a comprehensive knowledge of the opera, which Carsen

recalls first hearing as a child, that Gall was surprised.

"I would have expected that from a German," Gall recalled. "But a Canadian?"

After that Gall entrusted him with a series of new productions, beginning with Boito's "Mefistofele," with Samuel Ramey in the title role, followed by Bellini's Romeo and Juliet opera, "I Capuleti e i Montecchi," Wagner's "Lohengrin" (both later transferred to the Paris Opera) and Gounod's "Faust," and Carsen was on his way.

Since then he has staged, among other works, a Puccini cycle for the Flanders Opera; the trio of Verdi's Shakespeare operas for Cologne; Verdi's early "Nabucco" for Gall's first season in Paris; and several stagings for the festival at Aix-en-Provence, including Britten's "Midsummer Night's Dream" and a trio of works with Christie as conductor: Handel's "Orlando" and "Semele" and Mozart's "Magic Flute." He also made his debut at the New York Metropolitan Opera with a staging of Tchaikovsky's "Eugene Onegin."

Carsen avoids doing new productions of operas he has already directed, but when one of his productions is revived he likes to take a new look at it.

"After all, they should be better the second time than the first," he says.

"One day in 1990, out of the blue, I got a phone call asking me to do Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show for Eurodisney," he said. "I had to write it and direct it. It has herds of longhorn cattle, buffalo and other animals. It's a kind of re-creation of Buffalo Bill's show, with some dialogue and French and English, a dinner spectacle, half-movie, half-show, with music by George Fenton." It also is probably the longest-running spectacle he has worked on.

But opera remains his primary focus. "I discovered over the years that I love working with singers, and I get great satisfaction from working and rehearsing with good conductors. Opera is an incredibly active scene. It began as an elite entertainment in princely surroundings, but now it is hugely more popular."

He has worked on a wide range of lyric works, from Baroque to contemporary, including the European premiere of Marc Blitzstein's "Regina" at the Scottish Opera and the American premiere of Judith Weir's "A Night at the Chinese Opera" for Santa Fe.

Forthcoming projects include Francis Poulenc's "Dialogues des Carmelites" at La Scala, in a production already seen in Amsterdam; Richard Strauss's "Die Frau ohne Schatten" and Verdi's "Simon Boccanegra" for the Vienna State Opera; Offenbach's "Les Contes d'Hoffmann" for the Paris Opera Bastille, and the complete Wagner "Ring" cycle for Cologne.

But he has also had a few encounters with the spoken stage, including a New York staging of Tom Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" and Wilde's "Lady Windermere's Fan" for the Bristol Old Vic.

"And I would like to do a musical," he said, relishing the idea. "A great big musical."

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