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ARTS

Modern 'Candide' takes aim at America

By ALAN RIDING DEC. 13, 2006

PARIS — PARIS: In the early 1950s, after Lillian Hellman was interrogated by the House Un-American Activities Committee, she sought revenge by persuading Leonard Bernstein to work with her on a musical adaptation of Voltaire's great satire, "Candide." To both playwright and composer, it seems, the parallels between the Holy Inquisition and the McArthyist witchhunt were self-evident.

But their "comic operetta," which opened in New York 50 years ago this month, fared poorly at first. And in the decades that followed, Bernstein's "Candide" underwent so many revisions — most radically with Hugh Wheeler's new, more farcical, libretto in 1973 — that each new production has, in a sense, been a world premiere. The latest version, albeit the first to be presented in Paris, is definitely that.

Robert Carsen, the Canadian opera director, has rewritten and rearranged this "Candide" so that audiences need not deduce any analogy between past and present: he spells it out. The operetta's score and lyrics remain largely unchanged, but the staging and new dialogue make it clear that the target of this satire is the United States, from the 1950s to this day.

"I felt we could parallel Candide's loss of optimism and the way the world has lost its optimism about an idealized America since the death of John F. Kennedy," Carsen said in a telephone interview just hours after his production was given a rapturous reception at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris on Monday evening.

The production, which will travel to the Teatro alla Scala in 2007 and to the English National Opera in 2008, will have nine performances here through Dec. 31. (See www.chatelet-theatre.com for details).

French audiences, of course, have an advantage over many others: Voltaire's short 1759 novel remains a standard high school text here so that the misadventures of Candide, his beloved Cunegonde, the tutor Doctor Pangloss and myriad other bizarre characters are familiar.

While Voltaire's tool was satire, though, his purpose was serious: to demolish the optimistic view of life promoted by the German philosopher Gottfriend Wilhelm Leibnitz, who argued that, because God is perfect, no matter what evil exists or what disasters befall us, we live in the "best of all possible worlds." Put differently, this approach eliminates free will and human responsibility.

In his novel, Voltaire has Doctor Pangloss win Candide over to this view. And after Candide is expelled from his foster home in a castle in Westphalia for canoodling with Cunegonde, he somehow accepts a series of misfortunes — a war, a shipwreck, an earthquake, trial by the Inquisition, two murders that he commits, escape to South America, the loss of an accidental fortune and more — as destiny.

Only at the very end of the story does Candide understand that the real answer is, literally, more down- to-earth: "To cultivate our garden."

"When I re-read 'Candide,' I was shocked by what Voltaire wrote and how he wrote," Carsen said. "What a crazy piece of Dadaist writing, with the dead coming back to life and so on. I was startled that Leonard Bernstein had the courage to take up Hellman's suggestion. I can imagine him saying, 'That sounds great,' and then facing 30 years of work."

For his update, Carsen turns the Châtelet's proscenium stage into a large television set (presenting "Volt- Air TV") which, during the operetta's overture, shows white middle-class American families of the 1950s in their happy coexistence with new cars, refrigerators, blenders and other gadgets of the age. The castle in Westphalia ("West-Failure") then just happens to resemble the White House.

The master of ceremonies is Voltaire himself, speaking in France, although the rest of the show takes place in English. Because Lambert Wilson is one of few truly bilingual actor-singers in French, he can play both Voltaire and Doctor Pangloss. Other key roles include the American tenor William Burden as Candide, the American soprano Anna Christy as Cunegonde, the American mezzo-soprano Kim Criswell as the Old Lady and the Scottish soprano as the maid Paquette.

In both Voltaire's and Bernstein's versions, a central scene involves an auto-da-fé where Candide and Doctor Pangloss are destined to be burned at the stake to save Portugal from a repeat of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. Here, while retaining the jaunty song, "What a Day for an Auto-da-fé," Carsen does what Hellman and Bernstein had imagined: he recreates the House Un-American Activities Committee and casts the chorus as Klu Klux Klan torch carriers.

Then, when Candide flees to the New World, it is now the liner "France" which carries him to New York. After an immigration officer kidnaps Cunegonde, Candide sets off on his journey, accompanied by a loyal Indian, Cacambo (Ferlyn Brass). And there he discovers more of the United States: Mormon proselytizers in Utah, hippies in San Francisco, Jesuits in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Indians at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, and dancers in Hawaii.

Five exiled kings whom Candide meets are in turn transformed here by masks into five contemporary leaders — George W. Bush, Vladimir Putin, Tony Blair, Jacques Chirac and Silvio Berlusconi — who are sunbathing on inflatable mattresses in the middle of a huge oil slick. Surprisingly, lyrics written for the kings decades ago still work for today's politicians.

Carsen said that he imagined an Americanized "Candide" well before he inquired whether a major reworking would be authorized. In the end, though, he had no intent to alter the score and it proved too difficult to obtain permission to change songs written by no fewer than seven different lyricists, Carsen did get the go-ahead from Hugh Wheeler's estate to rewrite the libretto.

"They said it was all-or-nothing — and they let me do it," Carsen recalled. "They didn't ask me to change anything."

Still, what carries the story remains Bernstein's immensely lively music. Packed with waltzes, gavottes, polkas and rumbas, with lyrical arias and droll patter- songs, the score is a bridge between opera and musical comedy, all the while aiming his "Candide" for Broadway audiences.

Little wonder that, after his Châtelet success , Carsen embraced Bernstein's approach. "Wouldn't it be great to do this on Broadway?" he exclaimed.

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