

Mozart and The Knight of Malta

There was far more than meets the eye in the *Don Giovanni* finale as co-produced by *Operalaboratorio* for the Bav Opera Festival 2003. (Weekender, March 29).

In Mario Avogadro's work, no red flames shot up, no evil spirits hissed and squirmed and Giovanni was not dragged into the Mancoel's smokey pit! Instead, the protagonist was driven off-stage, cooped up in a wheelchair, in an intensively lit whiter-than-white scene!

Now the librettist, Da Ponte, who, besides scripting for Mozart, had also finished *L'Arbore di Diana* for the Spaniard Martin y Silar and *Tarare* for Salieri in less than two months, admitted to borrowing from his predecessors whatever he considered necessary to meet his deadlines! And there was no shortage of works on the Don Juan saga; with the likes of Tirso de Molina, Calderon, Moliere, Bertati, Villiers, de Bevette, Biancolleli and others who exploited the folk legends of the young criminal of noble birth who came to a violent end in a church and the grisly supping of living people with the dead, etc.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the story of the *Dissoluto Punito* was standard fare among the *commedia dell'arte* troupes who literally went to town with the antics of Leporella and the black tragedy of the beckoning devil.

Without exception, all these versions depict this hero-villain as a tyrannical seducer whose narcissistic confidence crushes everyone that stands in his way. So what fitter punishment for such a super macho man than to be confined to a wheelchair? Is there a more awesome hell than this for Giovanni, queried our production?

As may be easily imagined, the Casanova theme has been a perennial favourite of the performing arts. However, Suzanne Lilar's production of *Le Burlador* (the playboy) has shown that a modern reading of Don Juan may now dispense with the two features that accounted for most of its earlier popularity; the comic character of the valet and the moral ending in hell fire.



The theme may now dispense with these primitive elements since the psychology of Don Giovanni and some of the women who surround him are far more important and the possibilities they offer are truly infinite!

Now this is being written with *The Knight of Malta* very much in mind. The play, which first appeared in print in 1646, was jointly written by John Fletcher, Nathaniel Field and Philip Massinger. It will open the Second Mancoel Baroque Festival on May 2 and 3 and features Theatre Anon with direction by Chris Gatt.

Obviously, the troupe has long been pondering the mechanics of the production. On one hand they are aware that the baroque has never quite abandoned our approach to local theatre and players and audiences are still captivated by its strong spell. However, a *Ben Hur*, or *Quo Vadis* style of production for the Knight presents far too many pitfalls to even be contemplated.

So how do you go for a production that is not realistic, but conventional, not imitative but symbolic? How is this staging going to be inspirational, giving breadth and dignity to what might otherwise be a mere attempt at photography?

If the aim of modern staging is to intensify the reality of things, to give, say, the illusion of a

room, or the great outdoors, our technicians may undoubtedly muster this crude illusion of things. They are able to paint almost anything; except for the emotion that the scene should offer.

It is the very closeness of imitation which makes the modern mind unable to accept it. The eye rebounds, so to say, from a canvas as real as wood or a façade as real as a building.

Mr Gatt and his people need to take us beyond reality by replacing the invitation of the scene by the pattern which the scene evokes. When cleverly done, the mind is easily at home with such a treatment, accepting it as it accepts the convention by which, let us say, men speak in verse rather than prose!

The very fact that this Mancoel Theatre production will be seeking to present a contemporary version of an unknown Jacobean play – by superimposing today's culture onto a 350-year-old script – already marks it out as something worth seeing!

Incidentally, I wonder whether there is anybody out there who, after having attended the Valletta/Palermo opera, still relishes the prospect of watching Don Giovanni slide into that boiling cauldron.

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