



What's Killing Opera?

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What's Killing Opera? John Mauceri

In a purposely-provocative piece (http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/17/arts/music/how-hollywood-films-are-killing-opera.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all) in the New York Times ("How Hollywood Villains Are Killing Opera" -- August 17, 2011) Zachary Woolfe writes passionately about the doldrums in which opera finds itself these days in America. Mr. Woolfe should probably extend that geographical embrace to the world. While America has been almost unanimous in rejecting the directorial extravagances found in new productions of old operas, the story is much the same -- the repertory has stayed stagnant and includes a core of two dozen works starting with three from Mozart (yes, I leave out *Così fan tutte*) and ending with the late entry, *Turandot*, when Puccini's otherwise denigrated and unfinished final work (1924) came roaring into the 1960s with the ascendance of two singers -- Birgit Nilsson and Franco Corelli. (Let's save *Porgy & Bess* from 1935 for another discussion).

Mr. Woolfe's pain is shared by many of us who want more, new, -- and here's the point -- good operas. Blaming the movies for portraying opera as "lush, static, and stale" and concluding that this is killing opera is more a cry for help than a serious, logical, explanation. But it is a really interesting one. Hollywood has been blamed for so many things and why not add killing opera to the list?

But, imbedded in any object, in this case Mr. Woolfe's argument, is the negative space around it. The negative space can be described as "What actually is Hollywood?" Or, the negative space might just be the silence, the empty opera house, or, as in the case of a performance I attended in Berlin of Elliot Carter's opera *What's Next?*, the papered house -- an entire audience who answered the question posed by the opera's title with the answer -- free tickets!

Critics are blessedly free of the responsibilities of running an opera house, paying its artists and (this is the point here) communicating with the paying customers. All of these things depend on the other, and critics can tell us the way they want to world to be without having to live in that very world. This is a beautiful place, the Land of Music Criticism, and while I might sound sarcastic, I am not. There is a place for informed commentary about something one cares about without the vicissitudes and responsibilities of actually doing anything about it.

If the movies have been in love with opera since that very first silent film version of *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) with its scenes from Gounod's *Faust* there's a good reason. Movies and operas do the same thing -- tell stories. If movies occasionally reference scenes in an opera house or use the environment of an opera house to tell a particular story, it can be seen as no more relevant to the art form as the occasional setting for any story used in a movie. On *Bastille Day*, I was on the stage of the *salle Garnier* (the very same *Paris Opera* seen in *The Phantom of the Opera*) for the shooting of *Smurfs-2*. I suppose Mr. Woolfe, if he is reading this, he has just sunk further into his chair.

Ladies and gentlemen, movies have taken the place of the opera and there you have it. Perhaps movies are being respectful of its progenitor when it takes you there for a few minutes. Hard to know. Now you can see opera in movie theaters...

The problem seems to be bigger than Hollywood or wacky opera directors with state-supported budgets, or a bored audience needing electro-shock therapy to revivify the dead. I think it has to do with the curious alchemy that created lyric theater in the first place. The Greeks knew it. They knew the people deserved and, indeed required, a communal place to discuss important issues. It was done in a theater where words delivered through elevated speech (read "singing"), mime, movement, and ritual environment carried the discussion into the hearts and minds of those who attended. It purified and made the place and the people loftier and let them go home as better citizens.

When opera was invented in 1598 it was done so to restore this magical combination of things that seemed to have faded away from European culture. (It hadn't, of course, but this thing, named opera -- plural of the Latin word *opus*, or "work," contained the works -- all the art forms combined into one to tell important stories in a fantastic and entertaining way.)

And so began the genre known as opera. Complex and magnificent, we probably do see it a bit like those recent Hollywood references -- grand and occasionally inscrutable but also the very best of human achievement, partially because it is the ultimate collaborative art form. Even when it is fueled by a single genius like a Richard Wagner or a Giuseppe Verdi, one cannot actually perform those works without the collaboration of hundreds of people.

But the two men who followed Wagner and Verdi into the 20th century, i.e., Richard Strauss and Giacomo Puccini, left one of the elements out: political discourse. Neither seemed to want to bring us to the table, the Tabernacle, to explore and question and purify us. Instead Hollywood movies and the Broadway musicals, of all things, did that. Teatro alla Scala produced Puccini's Turandot for its posthumous world premiere in Milan in the spring of 1926 and in the very next calendar year Florenz Ziegfeld produced Show Boat on Broadway. And which is more serious and comes closer to what the Greeks meant, and indeed, what those erudite gentlemen in Florence meant when they "invented" opera?

All of us who love opera want the same thing, I suppose, new and great ones that contain the essential ingredients for the sacred brew of telling important, politically active stories in a medium that entertains and dazzles its audience. Right now, Hollywood is simply better at it, while Broadway seems to have forgotten that, too.

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