

PERFORMING REALISM:  
A PRACTICE-LED STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY  
REALISM IN THE STAGING OF OPERA

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# PERFORMING REALISM: A PRACTICE-LED STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY REALISM IN THE STAGING OF OPERA

## Abstract

This study examines the notion of realism as a mode of expression and how it can be applied to contemporary operatic staging. It emerges in response to recent research into the value of the arts to individuals and society, developments in the digital diffusion of opera and significant experiments within the field of cultural studies – Jameson’s *Antinomies of Realism* (2013) and Den Tandt’s *On Virtual Grounds* (2015). I posit opera productions as containers for dialogic interactions and reflect on the reciprocity of theory and practice in relation to my own directorial methods, my practice of Buddhism, and ‘practitioner definitions of realism’ extrapolated from semi-structured interviews with professional colleagues across operatic disciplines.

My first auto-ethnographic case study focuses on an international co-production of Handel’s *Ariodante* where I assert that staged operas are a form of cultural cartography, uniquely positioned to test the contractual terms of realism because of their heightened idiomatic form. I proffer performance as cultural orienteering; performers embody, and audiences navigate operatic material through a transformative relationship with narrative, place and performance spaces. In a second case study, I critically reflect on my own processes of generating a semi-staging of the contemporary opera *Written On Skin*, by George Benjamin and Martin Crimp, as a distillation of its world premiere production cartographies. The chapter explores the liminoid nature of performance in which there is a conscious presentation of material to be embodied and interpreted, as a form of creative resistance to the evacuation of production values.

My original contribution to knowledge is a practice-based investigation of contemporary opera staging from the point of view of revival director as well as introducing the term ‘performing realism’: a theoretical frame for understanding trans-historical issues of working in a dialogical realist mode. I argue that the concept of ‘performing realism’ increases awareness of how values and ideas about the ‘real world’ are embodied and staged within and beyond the opera house.



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## **Preface**

There is a pressing need for realism in the world: as a mode to counter ‘post-factual’ assertions and extreme delusions that have taken possession of contemporary social influencers. At one end of the political spectrum are denials about the causes and effects of undeniable global phenomena, such as climate change, ironically rejecting whole scientific and journalistic communities as ideologically motivated ‘fake news’. At the other end of the spectrum, are urgent calls for the world to ‘wake up’ to what is really going on around us, with evidence-based and corroborated claims to ‘truth’. Such claims marshal all manner of techniques and disciplines over time in order to produce plausible narratives with which to understand past events, present situations and form reasoned predictions about the future. Meanwhile, the immediacy and ubiquity of social media and the Internet offer tools with which to curate the representation of our lives; there is a performative emphasis on select visual images, the emotive use of music, symbols and sound bites (whether they relate truthfully to the actual world, or not) which – in anyone’s hands – threaten to undermine the authority of ‘experts’, reputable sources of information and nuanced argument.

This study seeks to examine the notion of realism as a mode of discourse – or way of expressing ideas about the ‘real world’ – in theory and creative practice. It emerges from significant theoretical experiments within the fields of cultural studies in the second decade of the twenty-first century. I reflect upon these through my own creative practice as a stage director of opera, and through a series of interviews with professional colleagues, set against the backdrop of reports from government and independent research bodies asserting the value of the arts to individuals and society under economic austerity, in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008.

### **1 – Questions and answers**

I have been motivated by two research questions:

1. How might I investigate and define the notion of ‘performing realism’?
2. How might ‘performing realism’ in opera create value for people and society?

In search of a context within which to situate these questions in 2016, I was initially inspired by the use of an array of methods from an interdisciplinary humanities and social sciences postgraduate student conference at Cardiff University: ‘Breaking Boundaries’.<sup>1</sup> The keynote speaker, Dr Turi King,<sup>2</sup> delivered an engaging narrative account of her work that combined genetics with archaeology, history and geography in identifying the remains of Richard III, and the social impact of the project. In the telling of her story, I was intrigued by the convergence of approaches to epistemology, or how the evidence for what could be mutually agreed upon as factual was collated and verified. For example, the archaeological techniques of map regression (where a more recent map is overlaid an older geographical record), combined with remote sensing techniques such as ground penetrating radar were initially deployed to determine a possible location, based on historical clues, before stratigraphic excavation and trench digging using a grid system began in a car park. Genetic testing of discovered bone for chromosome lineage was combined with research into genealogy. Corroboration of documentary and anecdotal evidence of Richard III’s physical attributes (in Shakespeare’s play, thought to be written over a century after the king’s death) with the skeletal remains was sought, and Bayesian statistical analysis of the likelihood that their results were correct employed.

The exercise of re-presenting this at the conference was effectively a performance in a lecture theatre, with all the apparatus of a sound system, screen, images, diagrams, text, graphs, media clips and videos, for a diverse yet specialist audience invested with, and in its very interdisciplinarity. During questions and answers Dr King revealed that, in spite of all the global media attention the project attracted, she *still* did not have her own laboratory in which to conduct her genetic research and that Leicester University, where the project was based, did not score highly on impact in the most recent Research Excellence Framework (REF) assessment exercise. Why? Dr King did not elaborate at the time of the conference, although I suspect some truth of the matter to have been

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<sup>1</sup> Held on 21/4/2016.

<sup>2</sup> Dr Turi King, Leicester University: <http://www.le.ac.uk/richardiii/team/turiking.html>

related to the transdisciplinary nature of uncovering the story. The project, we were informed, simply did not measure up under the criteria of the research impact agenda at the time, nor was it recognised as valuable *enough* by the university to merit its own research facility. Several members in the audience registered surprise, perhaps naively, but along with Dr King's discernible indignation at the lack of recognition at that point, this in itself I found thought provoking on a number of levels.<sup>3</sup>

In my capacity as an opera director, I must work with individuals and groups of people in order to communicate stories to many other people. The performance of my role comes with attendant issues of authority, vested interest and disciplinary bias when I come into contact with colleagues, which I shall explore in the section of this study on Theory and Method. An awareness of our reflexivity, within a group or society at large, within the systems that govern the way we operate and inform the way we behave necessarily leads to questioning the stories we generate together, how we assign meaning to and communicate them, what value they create for those that are involved, and how that value is understood by an audience in a lecture theatre, on stage and at large. Some understanding of realism, I will argue, indeed any number of realisms, becomes part of the process of making work with others and sharing it more broadly. A relationship with realism is therefore a necessity to notions of value and praxis.

## **2 – Towards the mapping of value**

Can value be mapped or measured, and why bother? Related to studies and pathways to creating research impact, or the good that researchers can do in the world,<sup>4</sup> the need to recognise different kinds of value has been identified, in the light of economic austerity and its effects on funding policy for the arts. The sources of value have been categorised with respect to music as follows: aesthetic, cultural, economic, clinical, societal, cognitive and hedonic (individual).<sup>5</sup> Each type of value requires different types of

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<sup>3</sup> Turi King, in 2019, holds a Professorship in Public Engagement at Leicester University, and is lead investigator on 'The King's DNA: whole genome sequencing of Richard III' project, funded by the Wellcome Trust, the Leverhulme Trust and Professor Sir Alec Jeffreys.

<sup>4</sup> Mark S. Reed, *The Research Impact Handbook* (Kindle, 2018). The HEFCE defines impact as 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia', quoted by Reed, p.16.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Cross, 'Musics, Selves, Societies: The Value(s) of Music(s)', publication forthcoming, presented at Cardiff University's Bird Lecture series, 23/10/2018.

evidence to support it, different agencies to be addressed in order to realise that value in policy, and different types of channels employed to influence each type of agency.

The significant recent exercises commissioned by the AHRC and other international research bodies into the value of culture<sup>6</sup> and the arts have attempted to illustrate (some quite literally in diagrammatic form) and redraw the agendas behind the measurement, assessment and funding of cultural activities. In spite of their characteristic focus on immaterial values, as one such overview of recent research has put it:

Research on the specific subject of culture or the arts is like a tour of landmarks or visiting a thematic village or festival: attention is focused on a particular aspect and it is reflected in depth. [...] Arts and culture can be experienced not only through their manifestations but also through their absence; through memories and even dreams. Thus, experiencing art might be much like living a whole life. How can this be measured? How can this be captured in research?<sup>7</sup>

How indeed, and to what purpose? Surveys and research reviews have turned mapping into a site of power struggle over ideologies and value-systems around culture and the economy. Many leaders of arts institutions have participated politically to assert the value of their art forms, and all their ‘value-for-money’ related activities, in the (some would say vain) hope of securing government and ‘stakeholder’ support.<sup>8</sup> Map-making, in this instance, can be seen as a site of defence against ideologically driven government economic policy, dehumanising efficiency targets, and evidence measurability, fought over for the diminishing slithers of the arts budget and what sense of control of it there may ever have been. I address my own positionality in relation to this in the Theory and Method section of the present study, but with respect to the measurement of value, I would agree with Ian Cross’s appraisal when it comes to education, for the need to recognise the arts, and music in particular, as part of an inherently human expressive, communicative tool kit and as a human right.

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<sup>6</sup> Culture was defined in 2002 by Belgian sociologist Rudi Laermans as ‘a socially shared reservoir or repertoire of signs’, and this definition is the basis of the argument for a common, or shared set of values in *Culture: The Substructure for a European Common* (2014), 7, <http://www.kunsten.be/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Cnet-De-waarde-van-cultuur-rapport-Engelse-versie.pdf> [accessed 31/10/2015].

<sup>7</sup> Vassilka Shishkova, *General Mapping of Types of Impact Research in the Performing Arts Sector (2005-2015)*, IETM, 3 and 11. [www.ietm.org](http://www.ietm.org) [accessed on 2/9/2015].

<sup>8</sup> The Final report by The Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value (2015) as an example has been criticized by Rupert Christiansen in The Telegraph: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/11423648/Stop-banging-your-head-against-a-brick-wall-politicians-just-dont-care-about-culture.html> [accessed on 20/10/2015].

In another AHRC report, Alex Beard (then chief executive of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden) is quoted with reference to the value he sees in local network mapping for creative connections and the impact that filters into education and investment.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, he is quoted in the same report as having suggested that one approach to describing culture is to produce network diagrams that record personal, community and institutional connections at certain moments or over particular periods of time; however, these become unwieldy and increasingly difficult to interpret as they grow more complex. These networks are likened to webs, root systems, meshes and flowerings that generate and hold value together. They are related to Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical concept and principles of the rhizome<sup>10</sup> and also to what has become known as ANT, or actor-network theory.<sup>11</sup> The cultural network or ecology has been positioned thus:

Cultural endeavour involves the making and the construction of social lives as well as (sometimes) the pursuit of profit. If culture is treated as an ecology, then the analytical approach becomes one of identifying cultural value, by taking into account the multifaceted and pluralistic value of culture beyond, as well as including, the economic. Culture recovers its organic meaning, its social significance and its moral weight, bringing into play the health of the cultural system, its creative capacity, its ability to generate new meaning, and the social and public goods that it produces, as well as – and certainly not ignoring – its economic return.<sup>12</sup>

Ecological taxonomies, it is claimed, encourage a wider grasp of the value of culture beyond the economic, although they are also employed (as in the above example) to appease disenfranchised arts communities – ‘culture recovers’ – whilst defending an agenda of trying to convince the funders to invest and of the return on their investments. The ‘cultural ecology’ has been defined as ‘the complex interdependencies that shape the demand for and production of arts and cultural offerings’.<sup>13</sup> This capitalist appropriation of the organic nature of culture continues in the language of ‘cultural capital’ as

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<sup>9</sup> culturalvalueproject, *John Holden - the ecology of culture* (Cultural Value Project Blog 2015, 25-29), <https://culturalvalueproject.wordpress.com/2015/02/23/john-holden-the-ecology-of-culture/> [accessed 30 October 2015].

<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*, 9th edn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Also see: <http://www.rhizomes.net>

<sup>11</sup> For an online ANT resource see: <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/centres/css/ant/antres.htm>

<sup>12</sup> culturalvalueproject, *John Holden - the ecology of culture*, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> A. Markusen, et al., *California's Arts and Cultural Ecology* (San Francisco: James Irvine Foundation, 2011, 10)

commodity<sup>14</sup> and the application of this term to institutions, objects and people as accumulators and consumers of it, as well as in the widely embraced and somewhat oxymoronic renaming of the arts as the cultural or creative industries. The language of ecology is also now popular in the pursuit of more nuanced endeavours to chart the impact of our actions, through an increasing awareness of an interrelated world and the ‘Anthropocene’, or geological era from the beginning of human activity registering in the geological record.<sup>15</sup> Eco-criticism is evolving as a mechanism to create change to intervene in the perpetual unfolding of the narrative of capital and its object-oriented ontology.<sup>16</sup>

Leading custodians of the arts – including corporations and individual barons rich in cultural capital – must navigate multiple discourses in their media-commanding roles if they are to perform in the regenerative cycle of creating-curating-collecting-conserving-reviving cultural forms.<sup>17</sup> David Poutney (CEO and Artistic Director of Welsh National Opera in 2015) for instance, publicly voiced his concerns over the effects of a neoliberal agenda of economic adversity in an article in *The Guardian* newspaper thus:

All the main parties’ manifestos include in their arts programmes commitments to increasing access and diversity. These are worthy and important goals in themselves, but at the same time no party – save the Greens – addresses the issue of the cuts in local arts services, which are *severing the branch* on which these twin goals sit [...] There are many kinds of health, and a lively mind stimulated and nurtured by cultural experience is one very important kind of health – a kind of health that can inspire and energise a new generation. We urge all parties to *wake up to the reality*, before that new generation becomes a lost generation.<sup>18</sup>

In this instance, the organic metaphor of ‘severing the branch’ on which the twin goals of access and diversity sit is arborescent (tree-like and hierarchical) which Deleuze and

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<sup>14</sup> P. Gielen, et al., *Culture: The Substructure for a European Common* (Groningen: Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2014)

<sup>15</sup> This has been variously dated as beginning with the carbon economy of the 1780s and 1945 with the fallout of nuclear explosions. See Christophe Bonneuil, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us* (London: Verso, 2016). The *Anthropocene* is now the title of an opera, by Stuart MacRae with libretto by Louise Welsh, produced by Scottish Opera in 2019, engaging directly with issues of climate change, sacrifice and the ceaseless human quest for knowledge.

<sup>16</sup> See Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2010), and Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015). For an influential book that sets out an ideological framework for viewing capitalism and its pervasive effects on politics, economics and public thought, see: Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> culturalvalueproject, *John Holden - the ecology of culture*, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> David Pountney, 'Austerity and the arts: the hidden cuts that are bad for our cultural health | Music | The Guardian', *The Guardian*, 22 April 2015. Added emphasis is mine.



Guattari deem to work with dualist and binary conceptions of knowledge opposed to the planar and trans-species connections of the rhizome.<sup>19</sup> Discourses around culture where the austerity axe falls position the value of culture as separate to human society, in other words, they might be likened to ‘cutting off one’s nose to spite one’s face’.

While the UK is certainly one society in which the value of culture is in question and positioned as a site of crisis, Flanders is another. Following the political and economic fallout of the referendum result on the UK’s membership of the European Union in 2016, UK citizens would do well to heed their mainland European neighbours, who have acknowledged a continent-wide trend of government assaults on culture, and place the non-measurable impact of culture in the heart of the debate:

The question about the value of culture touches upon crucial issues about (the decline of) shared and common values in our society and upon the way we give meaning to our lives. The arts and culture are important building blocks of open, democratic and diverse societies. But because we have increasingly begun to see culture as a commodity, the ‘communality’ of culture is at stake [...] This calls for a trans-boundary debate about visions, arguments and strategies [...] Let us collaborate on new policy approaches in order to make the value of culture visible and to take initiatives for more cultural interpretations of policy, both at the national and European level.<sup>20</sup>

The above-mentioned report judges the trend for evidence-based research into value to be founded on ‘shaky ground’.<sup>21</sup> It identifies a distinct lack of research which takes into account the performative power of the arts, culture and heritage: ‘These objects and activities generate values of which the societal effects are unmeasurable, or which people haven’t deemed worth measuring. As the word itself implies: dismeasure is hard to measure’.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, this Flemish interdisciplinary group of academics recall German philosopher Theodor Adorno’s observation that art is both autonomous and a ‘social

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<sup>19</sup> ‘As a model for culture, the rhizome resists the organizational structure of the root-tree system which charts causality along chronological lines and looks for the originary source of “things” and looks towards the pinnacle or conclusion of those “things.” A rhizome, on the other hand, “ceaselessly established connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles”. Rather than narrativize history and culture, the rhizome presents history and culture as a map or wide array of attractions and influences with no specific origin or genesis, for a “rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*”. The planar movement of the rhizome resists chronology and organization, instead favoring a nomadic system of growth and propagation.’ <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue5/poke/glossary.html> [accessed 8 June 2016]

<sup>20</sup> P. Gielen, et al., *Culture: The Substructure for a European Common*, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 64-5.

fact’: having become social in a lengthy process of emancipation from church and court, its autonomy the product of the differentiation of value regimes in modern society.<sup>23</sup>

Significantly in the context of my study, the Flemish report asserts that, although posing its own problems of bias, ‘judging cultural values from a professional perspective remains crucial’ and ‘showing us the known and unknown, the digestive and uncomfortable, the suspected and unsuspected is a specific value generated by professionals in the cultural field, which is necessary to evoke and sustain the true subjectification of our existence and community’.<sup>24</sup> Here the ‘community’ is understood to be the place where confrontations and conflicts between its members occur, particularly along lines of class, gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity, but also the place where these can be articulated through subjectification and be democratically resolved:

Culture – taken in the broader sense of the word to include creativity, cultural heritage and art – is the place where both subjectification and socialisation take place. The community offers safety, solidarity and thereby security – all basic conditions of freedom – but at the same time it is something to react against in order to shape one’s own life in freedom. In short, there is no individual freedom without collective structures of solidarity, institutions and constitutions to fall back on.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast to UK generated reports that tend to quote statistics and percentages on cultural engagement and participation (virtual synonyms for the consumption of certain cultural products such as opera), European culture is defined as a ‘commons’: not something which everyone has relative access to, rather something which is a shared practice and the result of interaction. This is a significant perspective shift, and perhaps symptomatic of how landmasses themselves shape human mentalities, island or otherwise.

The theoretical conditions for a shared sense of culture imply that all members of the community possess the necessary knowledge and skills (qualification), can successfully connect to the culture (socialisation) and create an authentic role for themselves (subjectification).<sup>26</sup> In practice, the Flemish report argues, both the model of (over-) regulating, bureaucratic processes and the neoliberal approach of quantification,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

audits, accreditations and assessments focus on managing qualification and socialisation but restrict the possibilities of subjectification. This results in people losing an autonomous grip on their own culture, along with meaning and satisfaction in their lives<sup>27</sup> – effectively ‘losing the will to live’ as identifiable cultural practices are subsumed into dehumanising systems.

The terms ‘value’ and ‘value-creation’ are to be understood here as different to the idea of ‘values’ in the sense of moral standards. Value is taken to mean that which is important to human beings, and those things and conditions that enhance the experience of living. The value of culture, as defined in the report on *The Substructure for a European Common*, is determined by the interplay of socialisation, qualification and subjectification in the socially shared reservoir or repertoire of signs. Furthermore,

The value of cultural sectors is precisely that they engage in such activities in a reflective manner. Cultural professionals continuously inform the common through these activities and are important in shaping communities. Of course, other social domains such as politics, education, religion, the media and, last but not least, the economy, also determine the shape of a society. Within cultural sectors in the broadest sense of the word this happens more reflectively, however, which means that processes of socialisation, qualification and subjectification are often intentionally interfered with in order to purposely steer society in a certain direction – or, rather, attempt to do so. Because of the number and diversity of cultural players, all this pushing and pulling does not result in a very clear direction, let alone a harmonious way of living together. Rather, this varied group of designers produce a common of many divergent types of interaction models and societal forms. In our view, a Europe of diversity, of various cultures, can only find collective support in such a common. Then again, that may be the very essence of what we in our European culture are used to calling ‘democracy’.<sup>28</sup>

Such a theory of so-called ‘European values’ centred on democracy, however, remains problematic, not least in the institutionalised colonial practices of older ‘democratic’ countries and systems riddled with inequalities on grounds of class, gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity. These have, of course, been intensified under the pressures of the refugee crisis. As such, claims to manifest the democratic ideal require continuous interrogation, unfolding in relative terms.

Roy Bhaskar’s influential *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975), *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1979), and *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* (1987) together initiated the movement of critical realism (CR) as a revindication of ontology in both natural and social science, making a clear case for how facts, all things considered, can

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 23-4.

become values; philosophy, committing the ‘epistemic fallacy’ of taking what we know for what is, becomes anthropocentric. The holy trinity of critical realism is: 1) ‘ontological realism’, or the dimension of intransitive objects of knowledge, which exist and also act in an independent manner from our theories about them (which exist in a transitive space); 2) ‘epistemological relativity’, or the idea that beliefs are socially produced, fallible and not externally situated from our particular historical time: because knowledge is relative, so too are criteria for truth and value; 3) the principle of ‘judgmental rationality’, or the idea that individuals can make decisions between relative beliefs, which itself assumes both epistemic relativity and historicity.<sup>29</sup> Following a critical realist approach, shifts in perspective on a given body of knowledge are advantageous to uncovering more of what is ‘real’ when it comes to establishing the facts, our lived experience of them and what values underpin them.

Dialogue and dialogic practices offer an instrumentally valuable contrast to politicised debate around facts (countered by ‘alternative facts’), which is directed towards argument and defeating opponents. As Gonzalo Obelleiro points out in his insightful essay ‘Values, Dissonance and the Creation of Shared Meaning’:

Dialogue is valuable as a means to normative adjustment and moral growth. But that picture has another layer, thicker, and deeper, that of a certain *intrinsic* value in dialogue [...] our values are inextricably entangled with the dynamics of interpersonal contacts. Your mere existence as a human being with beliefs, desires, dreams, and a capacity for pain poses demands on me. In the pushing and pulling, not only I change, but also my normative world, the world of my values. In the end, the values that emerge from the process of normative adjustment in dialogue are, as values, things cherished, shining with a light of their own. As the process through which value emerges, dialogue becomes something cherished as well; it becomes part of the new self I have become and the new world into which I enter.<sup>30</sup>

I therefore explore the rich promise of dialogue and dialogic practice as a methodology for research with regards to the value of opera to individuals and society in subsequent chapters of this study.

In addition to my own professional bias and identity as a British opera director working mainly in Europe or America, I am a practising Nichiren Buddhist and active

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<sup>29</sup> Iskra Nunez, *Critical Realist Activity Theory: An engagement with critical realism and cultural-historical activity theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 55.

<sup>30</sup> Gonzalo Obelleiro, ‘Values, Dissonance and the Creation of Shared Meaning’ in Peter N. Stearns (ed.), *Peacebuilding Through Dialogue: Education, Human Transformation, and Conflict Resolution*, (Fairfax, Virginia: George Mason University Press, 2018) p.148.

member of a global lay Buddhist movement SGI (Soka Gakkai International) or ‘society for the creation of value’. The idea of value creation was central to the philosophy of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944), a geographer, educational theorist and religious reformer who lived and worked during the tumultuous early decades of Japan’s modern era. Makiguchi is best known for two major works, *The Geography of Human Life* (1903) and *The System of Value-Creating Pedagogy* (1930), and is the founder, in 1930, of the Soka Gakkai, which is today the largest lay Buddhist organisation in Japan with 12 million members worldwide.<sup>31</sup> The term ‘value’ is used in the SGI thus:

Value points to the positive aspects of reality that are brought forth or generated when we creatively engage with the challenges of daily life. Value is not something that exists outside us, as something to be discovered; nor is it a preexisting set of criteria against which behavior is judged. We can create value at each moment through our responses to our environment. Depending on our determination and direction, the value created from any given situation can be positive or negative, minimal or infinitely great.

[...] Because we live our lives within networks of interrelatedness and interdependence, the positive value we create for ourselves is communicated and shared with others. Thus, what started out as the inner determination of one individual to transform their circumstances can encourage, inspire and create lasting value within society.

[...] This same progression – from the inner life of the individual to the larger human community – is seen in Makiguchi’s ordering of what he saw as the essential categories of value: beauty, gain and good. Beauty indicates esthetic value, the positive sensory response evoked by that which we recognize as ‘beautiful’. Gain is what we find rewarding, in the broadest, most holistic sense; it includes but is not limited to the material conditions that make life more convenient and comfortable. Good is that which enhances and extends the well-being of an entire human community, making it a better and more just place for people to live. [...] The philosophy of value creation is a call to action – as we are, where we are – in the cause of human happiness.<sup>32</sup>

This positioning of value and the human being, I think, offers another useful set of coordinates from which to approach the research question ‘How can performing realism in opera create value for people and society?’ and unavoidably informs my own perspective as a practitioner of Buddhism for over 25 years.

From the literature thus far surveyed, there have clearly been varied attempts to chart what people, institutions and societies value, where the processes of mapping, charts and boundaries themselves become sites of contention, possibly because their overlapping proves so richly meaningful. Cartography, defined as the study or science of map-making, promises, in its epistemological function, freedom of movement within its

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.tmakiguchi.org/intro.html> [accessed 2/6/2016]

<sup>32</sup> [www.sgi.org/about-us/buddhism-in-daily-life/creating-value.html](http://www.sgi.org/about-us/buddhism-in-daily-life/creating-value.html) [accessed 3 June 2016]

delineated and newly discovered territories, in other words, agency. As such, I turn my attention towards the contemporary operatic landscape.

In chapter 1, I survey material relevant to addressing my research questions in relation to the evolving art form of opera. I then focus my attention on ‘realism’ and its definition as a mode of discourse or way of working, through the lens and close reading of two recent studies from literary and cultural theory (Fredric Jameson’s *Antinomies of Realism* (2013) and Christophe Den Tandt’s *On Virtual Grounds: Blueprint for a post-mimetic dialogical realism* (2015)).

In chapter 2, I reflect on my own creative practice as an opera director working internationally in the twenty-first century, situating my work within an established and evolving theoretical landscape and my personal practice of Buddhism. I interrogate the reciprocity of theory and creative practice, detailing my own directing and research methodologies, including auto-ethnography, practice as research, interviews, case studies and dialogic practice.

In chapter 3, I undertake an analysis of primary research material generated through semi-structured interviews and dialogues with professional colleagues, conducted alongside directing my two case study opera productions. From these I extrapolate practitioner definitions of realism and discuss a range of perspectives in relation to themes of realism, dialogue and value.

Using the critical frame of dialogical realism, I advocate a practitioner-led approach to understanding the materiality of stage practice, inter-relating participant observation of rehearsal process, grounded knowledge of theatrical forms and modes of operation. I have designed the project so that the reader may engage with its portfolio elements thus: recent theoretical definitions detailed in chapter 1 are discussed in relation to my own creative practice in chapter 2, and to practitioner definitions of realism in chapter 3. The first three chapters are positioned to work in dialogue with my two case studies, in chapters 4 and 5. I have tabulated practitioner definitions of realism, extrapolated from interview transcripts, for easy reference in an appendix to chapter 3. In addition to gathering data on definitions through semi-structured interviews, dialogue has been part of my creative practice and instrumental to my work as a professional director. I employ the research methods and tools of critical discourse analysis, in analysing

interview transcripts and press reviews, and detail how consonant methods also form part of my creative practice of preparing and directing operatic ‘texts’, as well as in the exegesis of my case study productions.

In my twenty-year career as an opera director, most of the operas I have worked on have been from the nineteenth century, which have ignited my own passion for theatrical and musical forms of realism. During the course of the present study I have continued to direct productions of opera internationally but have deliberately chosen two examples from outside the nineteenth-century operatic repertoire to explore the range of forms and scope of a trans-historical realism; nineteenth-century realism is well-trodden ground. Chapter 4 is my first case study, focussed on the staging and reception of a production of Handel’s eighteenth-century opera *Ariodante*, which I approach as an act of cultural orienteering, employing the notion of the map as a tool for analysis and agency. I assert that opera is uniquely positioned to test the bounds of realism in performance because of its dialogical richness and heightened idiom.

Chapter 5 is a second case study focussing on George Benjamin and Martin Crimp’s twenty-first century work *Written On Skin*, through my experience of staging and touring the opera extensively. Building on the argument and perspective of the previous chapter, I revisit the theatrical strain of the performance paradigm, in which the liminoid nature of performance is foregrounded in order to consciously present material to be embodied (in a variety of ways), incorporated (in a human bodily sense), and interpreted. Consequently, I explore the themes of reflexivity, performance and performativity within the opera, addressing my own relationship with its themes and the ‘doubleness’ of being both practitioner and researcher. As a result, I position my own creative practice as a form of continuous performative invention and resistance to the erosion of production values resulting from measures and paradigms of knowledge serving efficiency.

My two case studies are my distinctive contribution to knowledge as a practice-based investigation of contemporary opera staging from the point of view of revival director, working with major figures and institutions in the sector. I give voice to the perspectives of theatre-makers and professional performers in a way that acknowledges the specificity of situated knowledge of practice and its intellectual contribution to the

field, whilst advancing a more rigorously theorised approach to realism on the contemporary stage. A discussion of my research findings informs the concluding chapter, or manifesto, in which I propose my thesis definition for ‘performing realism’. I offer recommendations for how ‘performing realism’, as both a theoretical framework and working methodology could be adopted more consciously to create meaning and value for individuals involved in producing and coming into contact with opera, thus indicating the term’s broader possible applications.



## **Note on Appendices and supporting material**

In addition to a hard copy of this written submission for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, I include an accompanying USB stick. For reference purposes only, to be held within the School of Music at Cardiff University, I also make available my annotated working scores of the operas in my two case studies. Whilst my copy of the *Written On Skin* vocal score may be read as an auto-ethnographic record of my working process as a movement/associate director on the world premiere production from 2012, the *Ariodante* interleaved production book (somewhat battered) is a working map of a 'live' production, which will be the starting point for another revival in Valencia in 2020.

On the accompanying USB stick my dissertation may also be found in two digital formats:

1. A word document folder that includes: the thesis as one file entitled 'Performing Realism total.docx', with embedded video clip and image files to illustrate examples in my case study chapters 4 and 5.
2. A PDF file of the thesis where the video files are represented as screen shot still images. Corresponding videos are accessible as separate digital files from within the folder labelled 'Production video files and other maps'.

In the digital folder labelled 'Production video files and other maps', you will find supporting folders for my two case studies.

In the 'Ch.4 Ariodante' folder I have included cross-referenced video clips to examples in my case study chapter. In addition, there are two complete technical video records of the production from its incarnation in Amsterdam with DNO in 2016: one is a static wide-shot video record, the other is filmed using a zoom lens to capture close-up details. These are not to be broadcast or shared more widely for reasons of copyright.

In the 'Ch.5 Written on Skin' folder, once again I include cross-referenced video clips to examples in my case study chapter. I have also added a full video record of my semi-staged concert version of the opera performed in Barcelona at the Liceu in 2016. This was filmed for television but was not actually broadcast. A professional recording of the concert I semi-staged in Berlin was available commercially for twelve months on the digital concert platform. Also, in the folder is a wide-shot technical archive video of the world premiere production of the opera made in 2012 for the festival in Aix en Provence. This is not to be disseminated beyond this submission for examination, for copyright reasons. A DVD of the production, when it was presented at the ROH Covent Garden, is available commercially. Lastly, there is a PDF file of the 2018 Programme made for the Beijing Music Festival presentation of the opera in my semi-staged version. These are included as supporting contextual materials to my thesis.

## **Acknowledgements**

The Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Opera and Drama (CIRO) based at Cardiff University, within the School of Music, has provided funding and a supportive environment for this study. I wish to thank Professor Jon Anderson at Cardiff School of Geography and Planning, for useful and stimulating discussions early on. I have received encouragement from a number of Music faculty members at Cardiff University, and particularly wish to thank Drs Amanda Villepastor and Cameron Gardner for their comments on early drafts of chapters and Dr Clair Rowden, my supervisor, to whom I am greatly indebted for her editorial experience, guidance and time.

I am hugely grateful for the generous support and participation of many individual professional colleagues without whom this study would not have been possible at Dutch National Opera, Canadian Opera Company, Welsh National Opera, ROH Covent Garden, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Mahler Chamber Orchestra, Liceu Barcelona, Teatro Real Madrid, Holland Festival, Le Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, KT Wong Foundation, Shanghai Symphony Orchestra and Beijing Music Festival.

I would also like to thank my Buddhist mentor, Daisaku Ikeda, and the members of SGI-UK in Wales for inspiring me to continue on this journey, along with my ever-supportive parents and partner Chris.

# Chapter 1

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## **Literature Review**

### **Summary:**

In this chapter, I survey material relevant to addressing my research questions, which includes prominent voices on the evolving art form of opera. I then focus my attention on ‘realism’ and its definition as a mode of discourse, or way of working, through a close reading of two recent theoretical studies from literary and cultural theory (Fredric Jameson’s *Antinomies of Realism* (2013) and Christophe Den Tandt’s *On Virtual Grounds: Blueprint for a post-mimetic dialogical realism* (2015)), with a view to testing their application to my own creative practice as an opera director.

## 1 – Value(s) and the evolving form of opera

In news reports from Opera Europa’s 2016 conference,<sup>33</sup> ‘sound-bites’ from participants, printed under the subheading ‘encouraging innovation’, underline the extent to which the discourse has become saturated with well-intentioned, forward-thinking business speak: ‘You’re not an opera but a media choice. Think of yourself as a media alternative’ (David Devan, from Philadelphia Opera), and ‘Opera is not inaccessible, people just don’t know about it. We need to bring it to them in a way they consume, (as in people are consuming their art differently)’ (Daisy Evans, from Silent Opera).<sup>34</sup> Whilst the Anglo-American political sphere and media focus is on a retreat into nationalism and border-control (e.g. Brexit from 2016, Trump throughout his Presidency, and the rise of the ‘right’ across Europe in the light of the refugee crisis), in contrast, the world of opera is committing to an expanding ‘virtual’ vision for opera in Europe, and beyond.

Opera Vision, as it is known – a development of The Opera Platform (TOP) initiated in 2014 – went ‘live’ in October 2017:

Opera Vision will offer a platform with enriched content drawn from a more diverse partnership of 30 theatres, 60% of them new to the project. The content will be more varied (full-length and short-form), inclusive (music theatre in many forms) and regular (an average of two live streams per month). The platform will focus on reaching younger audiences, celebrating European cultural heritage, reinventing opera for today, and making an opera-streaming platform self-sustaining in the long-term. Harnessing ever-evolving technology, Opera Vision will reach deeper into the lives of our citizens and promote European cultural values to the world.<sup>35</sup>

The UK is, incidentally, well represented with Opera North, Royal Opera House Covent Garden and Welsh National Opera participating. The promotion of ‘European cultural values’ through Opera Vision is planned to engage more than 5 million people globally, its potential impact projected diagrammatically (see Figure 1.1) on page ten in *Opera Europa News*.

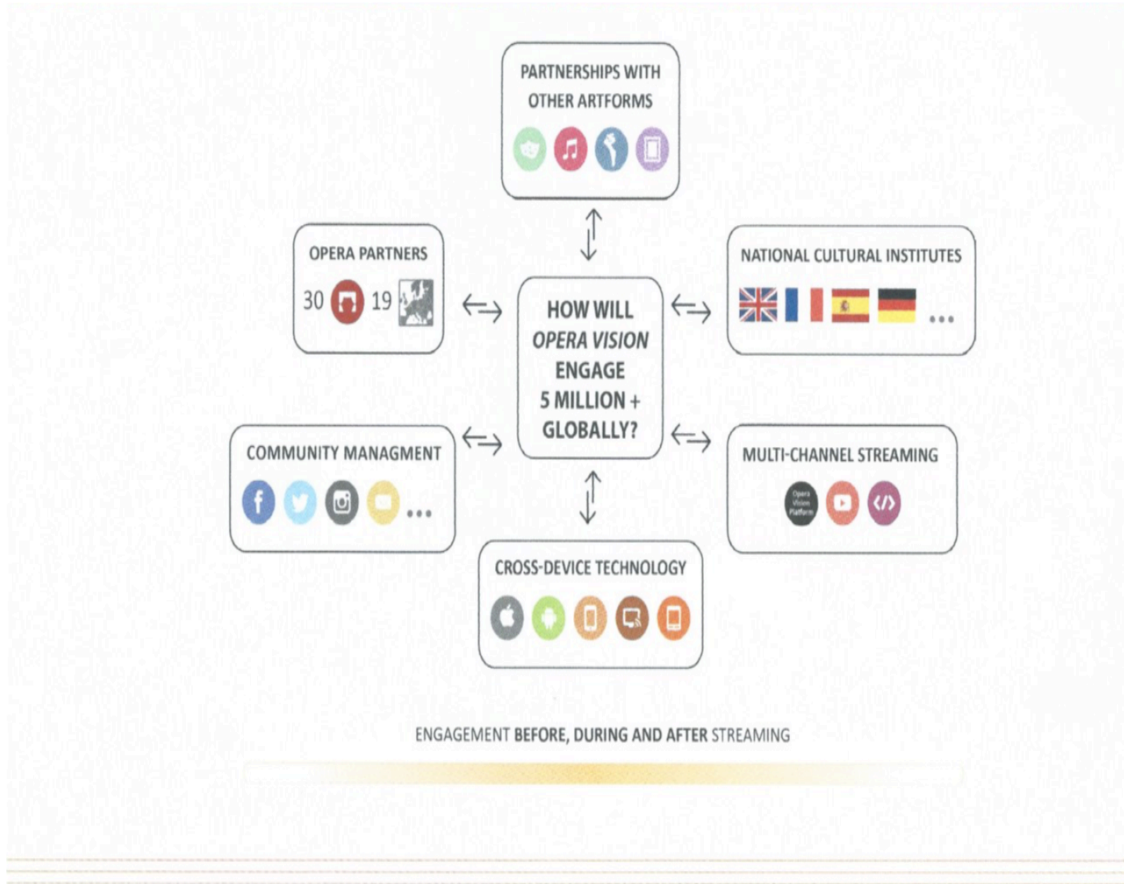
Figure 1.1: Projected engagement activity of Opera Vision

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<sup>33</sup> Opera Europa is the professional association of opera houses and festivals in Europe.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Seen and heard in Berlin’, in *Opera Europa News*, 56 (winter 2016), p. 6.

<sup>35</sup> Nicholas Payne, Audrey Jungers and Luke O’Shaughnessy, ‘Opera Vision for The Opera Platform’, in *Opera Europa News*, 56 (winter 2016), p. 10.



Such cartographic projections promise funders plausible pathways for engagement and impact and are increasingly a requirement in measuring, or at least charting a course for how artistic (and research) projects engage audiences.<sup>36</sup> The infographic is presented as dynamic (with the use of two-way arrows), technologically literate (with the use of easily recognisable digital icons), and attempts to communicate complex categories with the use of text headings and accompanying two-dimensional graphic forms (a number of these promote corporations through their ubiquitously recognizable branding, while others are less readily decoded with no accompanying legend).

By way of introduction, pre-empting the infographic (and perhaps at odds with the spirit of it) is Nicholas Payne's assertive text, which belies a somewhat colonial tone ('occupying', 'unchartered territory', 'cultural diplomacy', 'fractured continent'):

<sup>36</sup> OperaVision is supported by the European Union's Creative Europe programme, see: <https://operavision.eu/en/about-project> [last accessed 27/6/2019].

After occupying the operatic heartland of the German capital, our conference moves east next year to the unchartered territory of the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv. It is a conscious exercise in cultural diplomacy, intended to build an artistic bridge which may help unite our fractured continent. The programme will include sessions on international cooperation through co-productions and touring, the evolution of the ensemble, digital platforms, education and training for opera, auditions and performances...<sup>37</sup>

Opera Vision is hereby presented as a distinct and politically European instrument of bridge building, for the sharing and promotion of assumed ‘European values’, which are not detailed and merit further interrogation, but which ‘may help unite our fractured continent’. This begs comparison with the Eurovision Song Contest 2017, also held in Kyiv, promulgating a mission of post-modern inclusivity and the celebration of diversity, where the competition’s Portuguese winner made an unusually serious political statement about popular music having become all about ‘fireworks’ rather than ‘feeling’, which he believed his winning performance was advocating.<sup>38</sup> This critique of the popular music industry, from within, could have been leveled at many contemporary productions of opera and captures the popular vote for seeing beyond the mechanisms of over-production, pastiche, or forms of European nationalism with an appeal from the heart. Ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman’s insightful OUP blog entry on the subsequent Eurovision Song Contest, held in Lisbon in 2018, identifies how an ‘aesthetic that took the music seriously’ won over nationalists who ‘proclaim a euroscepticism that places the sovereignty of the self over community’.<sup>39</sup> Might we be witnessing instances of a different response to the rise of the right and populism in Europe, through an ascent of music with a mission to unite people rather than divide them?

Perhaps the most politically bold and daring article in the cited *Opera Europa News* publication is an appeal from the European Alliance for Culture and the Arts written by Anita Debaere, director of PEARLE (Performing Arts Employers’ Associations League Europe), which reads like a manifesto, or charter. The appeal asserts a belief in the ‘power’ (significantly rather than ‘value’) of culture and the arts as ‘the essential drivers of creation and appropriation of meaning. Through the diversity of

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<sup>37</sup> Nicholas Payne, ‘On Digital development, Dialogue and Diplomacy’ in *Opera Europa News*, winter 2016, No.56, p.3

<sup>38</sup> See: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/eurovision-2017-winner-portugal-uk-lucie-jones-who-won-song-contest-graham-norton-a7734786.html>, accessed 26/5/2017.

<sup>39</sup> See Philip Bohlman, ‘The ascent of music and the 63<sup>rd</sup> Eurovision Song Contest’: <https://blog.oup.com/2018/07/music-eurovision-song-contest/>, accessed 4/9/2019.

intellectual and emotional experiences they can teach individuals about complexity.’ Whilst challenging EU policy makers to ‘nourish the EU’s political project with a cultural one’, it still ties culture to issues of the economy, social cohesion and identity, avoiding the value-for-money argument: ‘While global challenges intensify and have an impact on European societies, Europe needs to preserve its interlinked economic and social model and enrich it with cultural awareness.’<sup>40</sup> Such committed, heart-felt belief is laudable, in my opinion, and contrasts somewhat with attitudes evidenced by further cuts in UK funding for the arts.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the UK’s European partners seem to be putting their money where their mouth is in funding Opera Vision. There is, of course, a big question mark hanging over how the UK opera companies will continue to participate post Brexit, exposing ideological schisms in the story and narratives around British and European citizenship.

Pierre Audi, as one of Europe’s leading barons of opera (having founded the Almeida Theatre in London, run Dutch National Opera for almost three decades, the Holland Festival and now as Artistic Director of the Festival d’Aix-en-Provence) offers a singular perspective on the future direction of the art form for both practitioners and society under the current economic crisis it faces for its survival. In an interview I conducted with him in 2016, as part of this research project, his comments on the star-system touch upon similar social arguments about how elite performers are valued and developed in sport from ‘larger pools’, but he concedes that opera, particularly certain repertoire, is not popular in the way film or sport has become, and is therefore ‘imprisoned in a cage of subsidy’:

PA – It cannot be an industry and will never be because it needs so much subsidy to survive and cannot make a profit. It is imprisoned in a cage of subsidy. Art-lovers have always and will need to continue to subsidise it. Popular operas are popular because of some exciting narrative subjects and melodies, such as in Verdi, but Wagner is *not* generally popular. If people decide they no longer want

<sup>40</sup> Anita Debaere, ‘The Power of Culture and the Arts’ in *Opera Europa News*, winter 2016, No.56, p.18.

<sup>41</sup> Arts Council England: Real terms Grant-in-Aid funding in 2015/16 decreased by -1.5% (£7.2m) compared with 2010/11. Real terms arts expenditure in 2015/16 fell by -3.6% (£16.8m) compared with 2010/11. Creative Scotland: Real terms Grant-in-Aid funding in 2014/15 decreased by -7.4% (£4.1m) compared with 2010/11. Real terms arts expenditure in 2014/15 fell by -11% (£5.5m) compared with 2010/11. Arts Council of Wales: Real terms Grant-in-Aid funding in 2014/15 decreased -12% (£4.5m) compared with 2010/11. Real terms arts expenditure in 2014/15 fell by -12% (£4.7m) compared with 2010/11. See Noel Dempsey, Arts Funding: Statistics, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, CBP 7655, 27th April 2016.

to subsidise opera it will die because it cannot survive without it; it will never become an industry. The statistics of producing great singers and great performance levels require larger pools of artists from which these stars develop. The star-system and commercial market can only last as long as exceptional artists are able to perform at their best and this cannot be replicated on an industrial level [...] We have to argue for the economic subsidy of opera as an art form. Other art forms are being cornered into justifying themselves economically. If we cannot justify opera economically, we are stuck. 50% needs to be benevolence, then talk about other justifications for subsidy. I've done it my way but history will judge if it was worth doing the way I did it.

The way opera is currently valued and produced emerges from a complex network and ecology of how opera productions come together and how companies are funded. Just in the UK, for example, these range in economic and artistic scale from the smallest ventures with enthusiastic local amateur groups and students at universities and conservatoires to more experimental professional environments such as the Tête à Tête and Grimeborn festivals in London. There are site-specific attempts to make opera a more intimate experience for audiences in their 20s and 30s, away from the social intimidations and grandeur of buildings, with companies such as Opera Up Close (with performances in pubs) and Silent Opera (harnessing the potential of equipping audiences with FM headphones to mix live and recorded sound). Since 1989 Pimlico Opera has performed in prisons. Along with the many schools and education projects supported and run by the country house opera ventures, the nationally funded opera companies all now run extensive community engagement programmes in addition to main scale productions, to fulfil their 'more for less' core funding remits from Arts Councils. Specialist companies such as Music Theatre Wales have long been producing exclusively contemporary operatic repertoire, whereas Opera Sonic, the company making opera for, about and with young people in Wales, and the first opera for babies (*Bambino*, produced by Scottish Opera) have emerged in the last few years, aiming to capture the imaginations of the next generation.

Ventures on another scale altogether are where state funding and significant private sponsorship join forces, crossing national borders to produce the extraordinary resources of the prestigious major companies in the world (such as ROH Covent Garden, Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich, La Scala in Milan, and the MET in New York) and co-produce the big European festivals in Salzburg and Aix-en-Provence that are complicit in



maintaining the much-criticised star-system of highly paid singers. In my interview with him, Pierre Audi acknowledges the potential of this latter development, but with a caveat for live performance:

PA – Exploring what it means to not have the live element, I think that there might be room for development in the next ten years to see if there's a secret door leading to new chambers using visual media and film to free opera from the live element. On the live level we are stuck. Either you go regional, local and do 'popular' opera for commercial reasons or become a receiving company for more experimental visionary work.

Like many colleagues with sustained careers in opera, I have been fortunate enough to work across the spectrum of opera environments and each offers a unique *experience* of the art form. It is in the making of situated and connected experiences, rather than economic justification or the making of money that opera, as I encounter it, continues to diversify. The current discourse around the arts as 'creative industries' draws on an appreciation of their ecology, but the diversification in how opera is being produced has been motivated by core values in both practitioners and funding bodies coming to the fore in tension with, and in response to changing models of funding, particularly under austerity. In the UK, social and participatory concerns often seem to be behind actions practitioners are taking to break away from buildings; allied with a strong sense of core values and a social conscience, these independent producers have a particular operatic vision, a great deal of personal drive and an administrative ability to successfully acquire funding. This is no small feat when the national companies soak up most of the arts councils' diminishing budgets allocated to opera.

## **2 – Orienting realism**

The project of realism is repeatedly expressed in the language of cartography, from the mapping of everyday life and human geography to 'floor-plans', 'cognitive mapping' and 'blueprints', as we shall see. There have been numerous and varied studies of realism, ranging from its emergence and demise as a historical movement linked with the form of the novel, for example, to its description of a broader genre of artistic endeavour with certain thematic concerns linked to notions of society (such as in socialist realism or theatrical realism), and as a subject of philosophical interest in the areas of semiotics, epistemology and ontology (such as in critical realism). There continue to be studies of

realism across disciplines, of its scope and definitions (as well as resistance to being defined), material focus, forms and categories. It is contentious and clearly remains of interest to many.

By way of orientation and as tools with which to navigate the extensive literature, I have chosen to focus here on Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson's *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013),<sup>42</sup> as the first of two recent experimental, conceptual attempts to elucidate realism as a mode of discourse through which to (re-) present reality.<sup>43</sup> The material subject of Jameson's realism is, primarily, the novel. The second project of my focus in this positioning of realism is by Christophe Den Tandt, professor of modern languages and literature at l'Université Libre de Bruxelles, entitled *On Virtual Grounds: Blueprint for a Postmimetic Dialogical Realism* (2015). I have chosen Den Tandt's study because his assertions for the scope of a contemporary realist project widen from the novel to include photography, cinema, music videos and other media. Both studies follow a lineage influenced by the dialogical ideas of Russian philosopher, literary critic, semiotician and scholar Mikhail Bakhtin;<sup>44</sup> however, there are also significant differences, which I shall explore. Neither venture into the realm of opera (or theatre, for that matter), which shall be my material focus in subsequent chapters. I intend to extrapolate Jameson's conceptual thesis, explore some of Den Tandt's visionary possibilities for realism as a dialogical mode and examine their application to and resonance in opera as part of my own journey to agency.

Before delving deeper into the ideas of Jameson and Den Tandt, I must acknowledge another significant contemporary thinker relevant to this study: English philosopher Roy Bhaskar (1944 – 2014), whose progressive philosophical formulations of transcendental realism and critical naturalism combined to form the significant movement of critical realism (from the 1980s).<sup>45</sup> The frame of critical realism has been summarised in relatively plain language thus:

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<sup>42</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013).

<sup>43</sup> A fuller definition of 'mode' in this instance is undertaken by Professor Christophe Den Tandt, of the Université Libre de Bruxelles and will feature in my précis section of his introductory essay 'Toward a Postmimetic Realist Practice' from *On Virtual Grounds: Blueprint for a Postmimetic Dialogical Realism*, (Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2015) also available on <http://www.academia.edu>.

<sup>44</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University Texas Press, 1981).

<sup>45</sup> See bibliography for a select list of relevant publications by Roy Bhaskar and other critical realists.

This is critical realism: the proposal that there are **(The) Real** universal generative mechanisms out there in the world that we may or may not know about, sense or not sense. That these mechanisms create the possibility of an **(The) Actual** event, from which we interpret as **(The) Empirical** data, in our own unique way, never forgetting that we are only seeing a very small part of a very big real world we are part of.<sup>46</sup>

Bhaskar's early work on critical realism (CR) was well received and continues to be convincingly applied by contemporary thinkers,<sup>47</sup> whereas his work on dialectical critical realism (DCR, from 1993 onwards) is more densely written and much criticised for its style of writing.<sup>48</sup> His later philosophy of metaRealism (PMR, or 'spiritual' phase, from 2000 onwards) attempts to integrate Eastern philosophical insights into his system but is more controversial, and has been rejected by adherents of the critical realist movement he initiated.<sup>49</sup> Bhaskar's ideas of a stratified reality – a laminated system with levels of ontology and an enveloping non-dual metaReality – resonate for me with Buddhist teachings, and with the work of David Bohm in the West (which I discuss later in my chapter on Theory and Method with reference to dialogue and Bohm's concept of the implicate order). All three share a similar insight but from different disciplinary perspectives: 'It is not that there are the starry heavens above and the moral law within, as Kant would have it; rather, the true basis of your virtuous existence is the fact that the starry heavens are within you, and you are within them.'<sup>50</sup>

Charting and applying Bhaskar's formulations to my own creative practice, however, have fallen outside the scope of this project. Bhaskar's subject is philosophy of science and philosophy of social science, distinguishing between epistemological and ontological questions and notions of the self, whereas both Jameson and Den Tandt draw their theories from the close reading of literary and cultural works, which relate more directly to my own subject material of opera, methods of creative practice, and educational background. I have chosen in this context, therefore, to concentrate on

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<sup>46</sup> Gary Hawke, Forward to Roy Bhaskar, *The Order of Natural Necessity: A Kind of Introduction to Critical Realism* (London: Amazon, 2017), p. x.

<sup>47</sup> For a recent example of the application of Roy Bhaskar's laminated critical realist system in which the superiority of a critical realist understanding of interdisciplinarity over a mainstream 'con-disciplinary' understanding of it is argued, see Leigh Price, 'Critical Realist versus Mainstream Interdisciplinarity' in *Journal of Critical Realism*, 2014; 13(1), p. 52-76.

<sup>48</sup> In 1996 Roy Bhaskar won the Bad Writing Contest for a passage published in his 1994 book *Plato etc.*, awarded by the journal *Philosophy and Literature*. See: [http://www.denisdutton.com/bad\\_writing.htm](http://www.denisdutton.com/bad_writing.htm)

<sup>49</sup> See Ray Pawson, *The Science of Evaluation: A Realist Manifesto*. (London: SAGE, 2013), p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> Roy Bhaskar, *The Philosophy of metaReality: Creativity, Love and Freedom* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 350.

dialogic practice as a method of researching realism, bringing Jameson and Den Tandt together alongside my own situated case studies as well as interviews with practitioners of grounded knowledge of theatrical forms and modes of operation. Yet, I find Bhaskar's metaRealist concept of a person's 'ground-state' consonant with the way the life-condition of Buddha, higher or 'true self', is described by the socially engaged Buddhist organisation SGI.<sup>51</sup> As such, where I have found them relevant/in dialogic relation to this study, I have favoured sharing my own personal reflections as a practising Buddhist, rather than adopt Bhaskar's project to bring Eastern philosophical insights into a more broadly accepted Western critical realist frame.

### **3 – Fredric Jameson's *Antinomies of Realism***

Jameson is an eminent American literary critic and generally considered one of the foremost contemporary Marxist political theorists. In the introduction and first two chapters of *The Antinomies of Realism*, Jameson proposes a conceptual framework for realism in the form of a phenomenological and structural model or 'an experiment which posits a unique historical situation'.<sup>52</sup> His conceptual 'experiment' is then applied to the works of a series of chosen novelists in the rest of this book, which forms the third in a four-volume sequence of publications called *The Poetics of Social Forms*.

Jameson observes in much of the published literature about the phenomenon of realism the tendency towards focussing on the historical emergence and dissolution of its manifestations, rather than 'the thing itself'.<sup>53</sup> Jameson cites Ian Watt's *Rise of the Novel* (1957) and Michael McKeon's *Origins of the Novel* (1987) as studies that chart realism's formal literary beginnings and acknowledges the numerous studies of its 'problems' and dissolution, such as Georg Lukács's view of the degeneration of realist practice into naturalism, symbolism and modernism. According to Jameson's reading of Lukács, the oppositional practices in the latter's essays *Narrate or Describe?* (1936) and *Realism in the Balance* (1938), claim that realism and the novel are 'reawakening the dynamics of

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<sup>51</sup> For example: 'The way to be a good social agent is to be in touch with and informed by your ground-state; you cannot then be oblivious to structural sin and ecological degradation, you must be an active agent involved in remedying them.' Roy Bhaskar, *The formation of critical realism: a personal perspective* (London; Routledge, 2008) p. 215. For a definition of the life condition of Buddha see:

<https://www.sgi.org/about-us/buddhist-concepts/who-is-a-buddha.html>

<sup>52</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 13.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

history’,<sup>54</sup> in facing ‘irreconcilable contradictions of a purely secular modernity’. This ‘purely secular modernity’<sup>55</sup> is named as capitalism, in the later writings of Lukács.<sup>56</sup> Jameson gestures to the importance of *mimesis* (as opposed to *diegesis*) as a literary category from Antiquity (Aristotle) with many offshoots, such as the Frankfurt School’s notion of the mimetic impulse as anthropology and psychology.<sup>57</sup> For the purposes and scope of his argument he omits theatrical practice, as well as somewhat disparagingly dismissing discussions ‘contaminated by those of the visual arts’ and cinema.<sup>58</sup>

Jameson positions realism as resisting binary oppositions, or anti-realisms, in its definition, be they aesthetic, or otherwise, and suggests that these are often invested with political and metaphysical significance, such as realism versus idealism, romance, melodrama, or modernism. The implied historical contexts and periodisation of these oppositions becomes problematic and convoluted unless, according to Jameson, capitalism is placed uniquely at the centre of human history and mediated by concepts such as modernity. He invokes Mikhail Bakhtin,<sup>59</sup> for whom the novel is a literary phenomenon, a symptom of social life and polyphonic (able to express a multiplicity of social voices); it is ‘therefore modern in its democratic opening onto an ideologically multiple population’.<sup>60</sup> Jameson adds philologist Erich Auerbach’s version of mimesis, in his canonical work *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), as a ‘syntactic conquest’<sup>61</sup> to his list of apologists for the realist novel as a form. He then turns to realism as a form (and mode) with a function to demystify.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> George Lukács, *Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

<sup>57</sup> The Frankfurt School is a school of social theory and philosophy associated in part with the Institute for Social Research, founded in 1923, at the Goethe University Frankfurt. The School consisted of dissidents who were at home neither in the existent capitalist, fascist, nor communist systems that had formed at the time. Many of these theorists believed that traditional theory could not adequately explain the turbulent and unexpected development of capitalist societies in the twentieth century. Critical of both capitalism and Soviet socialism, their writings pointed to the possibility of an alternative path to social development. See David Held, *Introduction to critical theory: Horkheimer to Habermas* (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 1980) p. 14.

<sup>58</sup> Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, p. 2.

<sup>59</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*.

<sup>60</sup> Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 4

The demystifying function of realism (in the novel) has had various historical manifestations, from the foundational undermining of romance as a genre and its values<sup>62</sup> via the construction of bourgeois subjectivity, to the defamiliarization and renewal of perception<sup>63</sup>, and arguably to a distinction between a bourgeois class culture and the economic dynamics of late capitalism. While noting existential writer-philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's argument that mimesis is intrinsically critical of its subject (the mirror never really shows what people want to see and therefore is always demystifying), Jameson's own view is that the realist novel has a vested interest in the solidity of social reality, and therefore resists history and change.<sup>64</sup>

Jameson then defines realism as a hybrid concept 'in which an epistemological claim [for knowledge or truth] masquerades as an aesthetic ideal.'<sup>65</sup> The pursuit of truth or knowledge inevitably leads to ideology; the search for beauty or aesthetic satisfaction leads to out-dated styles, decoration or distraction; the search for social or literary history must engage with our own present. Claiming to have identified the dialectical nature of realism as 'antinomies into which every constitution of this or that realism seems to resolve',<sup>66</sup> Jameson positions realism as a dialectical history: a process 'in which the negative and the positive are inextricably combined', as a 'a paradox and an anomaly' and more specifically as 'the unity of antagonistic opposites: the unity of struggle'.<sup>67</sup>

Jameson posits the first of his antinomies of realism as he sees them: the narrative impulse, *Fremdwort* in German or *récit* in French, which 'transforms narrative into the narrative situation itself and the telling of a tale as such'.<sup>68</sup> Via a contemplation of *ekphrasis*, or suspension of narrative in favour of description (reminiscent of the writings of Lukács), Jameson reaches the conclusion that the opposite of the narrative impulse has to do with temporality and the very concept of time: a present, although not the past-

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<sup>62</sup> *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes, at the beginning of the seventeenth century is given as the first example.

<sup>63</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Henry James are both cited by Jameson as examples.

<sup>64</sup> Jameson expands on this argument in the monograph entitled *The Experiments of Time: Providence and Realism* in Part Two of *The Antinomies of Realism*. Part Two is made up of two 'stand-alone' monographs.

<sup>65</sup> Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, p. 5.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* This definition is reminiscent of many mythological metaphors for the paradox of existence: creativity and destruction, good and evil locked in an eternal struggle, manifested in numerous cultures as creatures or anthropomorphised forces of light and dark. Perhaps this also registers the influence of Eastern philosophy on existential thinkers in the West.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

present-future kind of present, nor one of before and after. Invoking Alexander Kluge's 'insurrection of the present against the other temporalities',<sup>69</sup> Jameson rather dramatically names this realm 'affect', or 'the body's present'. This is slightly different from other definitions of 'affect', which tend toward the term denoting meaningful feeling in a situation, below and beyond language.

In identifying the two chronological end points of realism (in the novel) – the genealogy of *récit* and its dissolution in the literary representation of affect – Jameson brings them together to offer up the image of these two entwined strands locked in tension as a phenomenological and structural model of realism's 'DNA', so to speak. In his first chapter on the twin sources of realism, Jameson's discourse surveys the writings of Ramon Fernandez, André Gide, Sartre and Walter Benjamin leading him to identify 'destiny' or 'fate' as the deeper philosophical content, reason and purpose of *récit*: 'my scar, my sore, my being for other people, my existence as a character in a story'.<sup>70</sup> In the light of this, he then concludes that the function of metaphor is 'to detemporalize existence, dechronologize and denarrativize the present' into an 'eternity'. Jameson's definition of realism is thus distilled as a consequence of the tension between destiny and the eternal present – a middle way, if you will.

In his second chapter on 'affect, or, the body's present', Jameson summarises his own previous study 'The End of Temporality',<sup>71</sup> in which he 'theorized a shrinking of contemporary (bourgeois) experience such that we begin to live a perpetual present with a diminishing sense of temporal or indeed phenomenological continuities'.<sup>72</sup> This he aligns with Deleuze's and Guattari's notion of a schizophrenic present,<sup>73</sup> yet suggests their definition connects more with a utopian literary lineage celebrating temporal immediacy, from William Wordsworth and Gustave Flaubert to modern times. Jameson's own 'perpetual present' is a 'reduction to the body' as it 'begins to know more global waves of generalised sensations'.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Alexander Kluge, *Der Angriff der Gegenwart gegen die übrige Zeit* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1985).

<sup>70</sup> Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, p. 21.

<sup>71</sup> Jameson, 'The End of Temporality', in Jameson, *Ideologies of Theory* (London: Verso, 2009).

<sup>72</sup> Jameson, *Antinomies*, p. 28.

<sup>73</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (Paris: Minuit, 1972).

<sup>74</sup> Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, p. 28.

Jameson thus makes a distinction in his sense of the word ‘affect’, between feelings and named emotions. Affect, then, eludes language and the naming of feelings, whereas emotions are experienced culturally and historically in named phenomena such as love, fear, anger, pleasure, disgust etc., organised and recognised according to culture and historical time.<sup>75</sup> There is a process of reification in the naming of phenomenological states. Jameson argues how the naming and understanding of emotions has evolved historically and words have been re-appropriated (such as ‘ennui’ to describe the new state of nineteenth-century boredom). ‘Anxiety’ is given as an example of how an everyday ‘unnerving experience’ has been rescued (presumably by Søren Kierkegaard’s discoveries and the subsequent development of psychoanalysis) from the ‘melodramatic and quasi-religious grandeur’ of words like ‘anguish’.<sup>76</sup>

Jameson’s contribution to these observations is to state a connection between newly experienced ‘affect’ and the emergence of the phenomenological body in representation, where the documented language of the mid-nineteenth century in the novel is ‘the most comprehensive evidence as to a momentous yet impossibly hypothetical historical transformation of this kind’.<sup>77</sup> Jameson is keen to elucidate Honoré de Balzac’s use of language as always meaningful, even when describing a physical sensation that appears to be an affect – ‘*l’odeur de pension*’ (Jameson’s italics) or the boarding house smell, described at the beginning of *Le père Goriot* (1835) is the example deployed – because it is used to signify moral and social status and therefore becomes allegorical. In Balzac’s writing, everyday detail is infused with meaning through the use of metonymy and metaphor, Jameson argues. Balzacian description, as history progresses however, becomes stereotyped and thus loses its effectiveness to represent

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<sup>75</sup> From my own experience of working with performers, this feels instinctively plausible. Recent popular literature on the ‘gut feeling’ (Giulia Enders, *Gut – the inside story of our body’s most underrated organ* (London: Scribe Publications, 2015)) has illustrated how the gut as the body’s largest sensory organ works co-operatively with the brain to stabilise our emotional lives. Discoveries in microbiology have led to assertions that certain bodily responses are triggered and processed physically not by the brain but by the gut. In moments of danger, the body responds automatically, biologically, hormonally and instinctively, often before the conscious mind registers and processes anxiety or fear.

<sup>76</sup> Jameson (Ibid., p. 31) cites Rei Terada’s definition of emotions as conscious states (Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory: Emotion After the ‘Death of the Subject’* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2001), p. 82). Jameson also cites the Sapir-Whorff hypothesis, first advanced by Edward Sapir in 1929 and subsequently developed by Benjamin Whorf, which proposes that the structure of a language determines a native speaker’s perception and categorization of experience.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 32.



reality. This Jameson contrasts with a more ‘indeterminable synaesthesia’<sup>78</sup> in Flaubert and Baudelaire, which no longer mean anything other than existing as ‘states of the world’.<sup>79</sup>

The sense of smell, as identified in Teresa Brennan’s *Transmission of Affect* (2004) is cited as a vehicle for the interpersonal transmission and contagion of affect,<sup>80</sup> but problematised as easily confusing physical perception and sensation with this new nameless heightened presence. Jameson invokes ‘intensity’ (citing its use by Gilles Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard) and defining it as ‘the capacity of affect to be registered according to a range of volume, from minute to deafening, without losing its quality and its determination.’ He also invokes the word ‘singularity’ to elaborate his definition of affects, which become ‘singularities and intensities, existences rather than essences, which usefully unsettle the more established psychological and physiological categories’.<sup>81</sup>

Jameson logically turns to the phenomenologists and existential thinkers Martin Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre for the term ‘*stimmung*’ (translated as mood, or tuning, from *stimmen* to harmonise, also related to *Stimme*, or voice). But is the individual, or the world, or their inseparability the subject of inquiry? This question, then, leads Jameson to describe the logic of affect as a sliding scale or kind of musical chromaticism, aligning the disaggregation of the Western tonal system and sonata form with the emergence of Western modernity and ‘rationality’, citing Max Weber’s *The Rational and Social Foundations of Music* (1958).<sup>82</sup> This uncontested claim appears to be more of a gesture to

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>79</sup> This teeters on the edge of a claim to being factual and deterministic, albeit in a non-material way, which returns us to Jameson’s definition of realism as ‘an epistemological claim masquerading as an aesthetic ideal’ (*The Antinomies of Realism*, p. 5). Jameson addresses Flaubert’s ability to characterise the abstract in more depth in his essay ‘The Realist Floor Plan’, in *The Ideologies of theory* (London: Verso, 2009). His example is a fragment from Flaubert’s tale *Un Coeur Simple* (the very same Barthes used to attack the concept of reference and realism in ‘L’effet de réel’ in 1968). Jameson writes: ‘this sudden and unexpected burst of “affect” announces the fitful emergence of the subject in Flaubert’s text: the “musty smell” inscribing, with a triumphant, desolate flourish, the place of subjectivity in a henceforth reified universe’ (p. 308).

<sup>80</sup> Teresa Brennan, *Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>81</sup> Jameson, *Antinomies*, p. 36. Jameson provides a list of antiquated names for emotions and processes and their updated versions with the emergence of affect on page 44.

<sup>82</sup> Jameson’s discussion then addresses Wagner’s ‘endless melody’, among other devices (*Leitmotiven*, diminished sevenths and ninths, ‘immense (but unmotivated) crescendos and diminuendos’) as displacing the Italian ‘aria’, a form designed, claims Jameson, to express the named emotion, and ideologically to embody it. He declares: ‘Wagner’s repudiation of the aria is thus a profound critique and repudiation of the

the broader contemporary cultural climate than a shift in material focus away from the novel for Jameson's 'unique historical situation' and suggests more, I think, an interdisciplinary resonance for his experiment. Jameson continues his borrowing of terms with reference to orchestral colour, reminding us that chromaticism comes from the Greek word *chroma* (meaning skin, or skin colour). In the world of fine art, Jameson cites Édouard Manet for his 'new' focus on the material colour of the human body, contemporaneous to the developments taking place in European music. Claude Monet's 'eternalizing' impressionism with its numerous studies of the same subject at different times of day in a 'new conjuncture of light and temporality' is also invoked as evidence of an emergent realism.<sup>83</sup> Temporality specific to affect is defined by Jameson as 'the sliding scale of the incremental, in which each infinitesimal moment differentiates itself from the last by a modification of tone and an increase or diminution of intensity'.<sup>84</sup> This new affect becomes 'the very chromaticism of the body itself' and 'the organ of perception of the world itself'.<sup>85</sup>

Although Jameson does not detail here, as others have done, the thematic preoccupations of much of the realist literary cannon around the daily lives of ordinary people (as opposed to the nobility or mythological figures), there is, in the examples drawn from art, music and literature the claim to locate a paradigm shift in modernising societies, in both perception and experience, from the mid-1800s. In conjunction with the historic emergence of the bourgeois body, Jameson boldly affirms, is the assertion of a new kind of affective phenomena occurring in the mid-nineteenth century. As part of Jameson's larger project of 'cognitive mapping' begun in earlier works,<sup>86</sup> here he is reaching to identify new registering apparatuses designed to capture these new phenomena in Wagner and Monet, alongside the investigations of existential philosophers and the emergence of phenomenology. The invention of new affective styles

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named emotion as such, both in reality and in its concept; and what he replaces it with is very precisely affect as such', Jameson *Antinomies*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 41

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 42

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 43. I am here reminded of the Buddhist doctrine of *ichinen sanzen* (in Japanese) or 3,000 realms in a single moment of life (a conscious moment being conceived as 1/60<sup>th</sup> of a second), a theoretical system developed by renowned sixth-century Chinese scholar T'ien-t'ai (Chih-i) to describe the boundless extent of reality at each moment, derived from Shakyamuni's Lotus Sutra.

<sup>86</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

in the novel by Flaubert and Baudelaire are then manifest variously in the novelists to whom Jameson devotes the remaining chapters of his ‘experiment’. Jameson’s proposed historic development in consciousness occurs in conjunction with modernity. Somewhat cosmically, in that the microcosm of the novel metonymically reflects the macrocosm of society, realism emerges and recedes from the tensions between its conceived antinomies, destiny and eternity.

Whilst Jameson’s historical claim for realism may be bold – that it is the expression of an evolution in consciousness of the human being – this is conjecture and currently impossible to prove, even with all the interdisciplinary references and resonances he sees in the broader cultural fabric. In surmising an evolution of bodily consciousness, an evolution in social consciousness, and therefore social conscience, might also be intimated. We could reach out to historical markers such as the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, the Methodist (and Quaker) movements of the mid-nineteenth century, Chartism, the Suffragettes and even the founding of the Labour Party in 1900 for corroborating landmarks with which to stake out a theory. However, my focus is on realism as a mode and, if it can still be said to exist, how it might operate now (as opposed to in the nineteenth century), and to what end.<sup>87</sup>

#### **4 – Den Tandt’s Blueprint**

Christophe Den Tandt observes a present distrust of any claim for discourse to produce truthful, value-free statements. The search for truth is entangled, if not indistinguishable, from expressions of the will to power.<sup>88</sup> The aesthetics of realism, according to Den Tandt, make a claim to approach social issues from the perspective of truth and rationality through the ‘referential dimension of art’ – its ability to maintain a determinate, truth-oriented relation to the non-artistic world. Referring to Lukács, Den

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<sup>87</sup> I have, therefore, made a deliberate choice *not* to précis two influential texts in the field of musicology: Carl Dalhaus’s *Realism in Nineteenth-Century Music* (Cambridge University Press: 1985), and Manfred Kelkel’s *Naturalisme, vérisme et réalisme dans l’opera: de 1890 à 1930*, (Paris: Libr. Philosophique J. Vrin, 1984).

<sup>88</sup> Den Tandt affirms this to be the case in the wake of Saussurean semiology, poststructuralist deconstruction, neo-pragmatism, multiculturalism, post-colonialism and neo-historicism. Christophe Den Tandt, *On Virtual Grounds: Blueprint for a Postmimetic, Dialogical Realism*, p. 2.

Tandt proffers that realism must scrutinise and be critical of society ‘in the hope of questioning its ideological pieties’.<sup>89</sup>

Den Tandt then goes on to summarise how realism, in any form, resists categorization but has been defined variously as:

1. An artistic *movement* he terms ‘classic realism’ that refers to a historical period of the mid to late-nineteenth century. Somewhat in conflict with Jameson’s argument and frame for realism, however, Den Tandt sees this as unsatisfactory as there are many exceptions and anomalies of works exhibiting the ‘characteristics of realism’ that fall outside these dates, therefore challenging Jameson’s thesis of realism as a ‘unique historical situation’ inextricably linked to modernity.<sup>90</sup>
2. A *mode*, or artistic discourse ‘whose thematic focus, epistemological assumptions, and humanistic commitment are specifically tuned to the representation of social reality’,<sup>91</sup> evaluated from the perspective of its relation to everyday life and with an implicit trust in the bond between artistic ‘text’ (in the broadest sense) and the world. This is a trans-historical principle, in a lineage tracing back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, endorsed by Erich Auerbach<sup>92</sup> and Northrop Frye,<sup>93</sup> but limited (up till now) by its concept of *mimesis* as a mirror-like reproduction of social life. Den Tandt posits that a re-evaluation of the concept of realism in relation to *mimesis* and its epistemological presuppositions, therefore, is necessary to continue in this mode.
3. An artistic *genre*, categorized as a set of works ruled by Jameson’s ‘semantic’ or ‘syntactic’ conventions, ‘mechanisms and structures’:<sup>94</sup> a textual paradigm with thematic concerns. Formalists (in the lineage of Aristotle to Frye) and

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 3. Den Tandt is quoting from George Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John Mander (London: Merlin, 1963), p. 93.

<sup>90</sup> Andreas Giger reviews attempts to categorize operatic *verismo* in terms of a movement, connected to a literary movement, where he tabulates works, rating them on a scale of transition from idealism to realism through their use of plot, theme, vocabulary, verse, harmony, melody, performance practice and production. Andreas Giger, ‘Verismo: Origin, Corruption, and Redemption of an Operatic Term’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 60/2 (Summer 2007), pp. 271-315.

<sup>91</sup> Den Tandt, *On Virtual Grounds*, p. 4.

<sup>92</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. W. R. Trask, introduction by Edward Said (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003 (1946)).

<sup>93</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973 (1957)).

<sup>94</sup> Fredric Jameson, ‘Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism’, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 107.

structuralists (such as Roman Jakobson, Roland Barthes and Tzvetan Todorov) are sympathetic towards this version of realism as a genre because it can then be categorised as a textual fabric constructed like other cultural artefacts, regardless of its claims to designate the world. Textual devices of ‘verisimilitude’ and ‘reality effects’ (Barthes) are part of its apparatus.<sup>95</sup>

Building on the work that has been done on realism as a genre, particularly its literary, filmic and material signifiers, Den Tandt proposes to disentangle the formalist and structuralist influences on the concept of realism from antirealist presuppositions, for example around *mimesis* and Jakobson’s notion of ‘literariness’.<sup>96</sup>

Whilst detailing examples of resilient ‘classic realism’ in turn-of-the-twentieth century culture, Den Tandt claims pursuing the mode-based approach enables an analysis that refrains from ‘axiomatic antirealism’.<sup>97</sup> This makes a similar point to Jameson (in his *Antinomies of Realism*) where he dismisses binary opposites as politicised and metaphysical, except Den Tandt is claiming something more here. Contemporary examples of Den Tandt’s realist mode manifest both old and new aesthetic choices, using hybridity and the avant-garde to re-contextualise art’s ability to represent society. Under this argument, even the most radical modernism may contribute to the mapping of the world. Mikhail Bakhtin is invoked, but not with respect to the novel and his ‘heteroglossia’, nor to the polyphony of social voices possible within it.<sup>98</sup> Den Tandt’s ‘dialogical realism’ is:

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<sup>95</sup> See Roland Barthes, ‘L’effet de réel’.

<sup>96</sup> Literariness, in Russian Formalism, is defined as the feature that makes a given work a literary work, distinguishing it from ordinary texts through its use of certain artistic devices. Jakobson first used the term in 1921 in his work *Modern Russian Poetry*. See B. K. Das, *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2005).

Another Russian Formalist, Victor Shklovsky, further claimed that the literariness of texts operates through ‘defamiliarization’ in that their use of language deviates from ‘ordinary’ language and has the artistic purpose to disrupt ordinary or automatic responses to things and therefore has the capacity to offer new ways of perceiving the world. Shklovsky also differentiated between ‘plot’, as the chosen order in which to communicate events and ‘story’, defined as the chronological sequence of events. See J. J. Williams, *Theory and the Novel: Narrative Reflexivity in the British Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). From this terminological distinction, the word ‘narrative’ would then denote how the story is told.

<sup>97</sup> Den Tandt, *On Virtual Grounds*, p. 7.

<sup>98</sup> Heteroglossia (from the Greek meaning ‘other’ or ‘different’ + ‘tongue’) was coined by Mikhail Bakhtin in *The Dialogical Imagination* to describe the variety and diversity of languages and voices used in epic and in the novel.

... an aesthetic project pursued by works in which the techniques of representation previously guaranteeing art's ability to represent the social world – and also making realism identifiable with regard to other modes of representation – interact dialogically with discursive devices borrowed from experimental movements that ostensibly problematize or reject the imitation of phenomenal appearances.<sup>99</sup>

Den Tandt cites discussions of the graphic arts as well as Damian Grant's vision of a possible 'conscious realism', which integrates the subjectivism of modernist aesthetics (such as 'the stream of consciousness'), departing from the 'conscientious realism', fact-based positivism or 'literalism' of nineteenth-century authors.<sup>100</sup>

## 5 – Realism's capacity to modernise itself

Den Tandt asserts that contemporary realist art unfolds within an inter-medial field: 'each mode of expression fashions the representation of the social world according to its semiotic specificities'.<sup>101</sup> The media, now overwhelmingly visual (and arguably aural, although Den Tandt does not make this point), has taken over the function of 'classic literary realism' to document social reality. However, signs in distinct media are negotiated according to distinct procedures. For want of a better terminology, Den Tandt distinguishes between 'lighter' and 'heavier' signs in the semiotic negotiations between media.<sup>102</sup> These require the charting of how the interplay of various signifiers in a given situation supports or undermines realist representation. He identifies fictional films, documentaries and TV footage as inherently 'plurimedial or intermedial, and therefore

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<sup>99</sup> Den Tandt, *On Virtual Grounds*, p. 7.

<sup>100</sup> Den Tandt is summarising Damian Grant, *Realism*. The Critical Idiom no. 9. (London, Methuen, 1970).

<sup>101</sup> Den Tandt, *On Virtual Grounds*, p. 10.

<sup>102</sup> This is Den Tandt's realist paradigm based on lesser semiotic negotiability which he further develops in Chapter 7 of *On Virtual Grounds*: in literature, the tokens (Peircean symbols or Saussurean arbitrary signs) qualify as the lightest and least trustworthy in the materialistic continuum of 'nature differentials' or 'grounding gestures'. These 'grounding gestures' are catalysts of dialogical solidarity; sign systems that reach out towards non-semiotised reality. Referential tools and nature differentials are the mapping apparatus that wrestles against the postmodern concept of unstable, fluid or dematerialised social relations. For example, location shots in photographs and film, 'by their indexical (*mise-en-scène*) and iconic properties, render possible the most reliable mechanism of heuristic disclosure that can be carried out in a framework that is otherwise organised discursively, dialogically, and intertextually.' (p. 225) Differentials cut across signifiers and signifieds in complex fashion. The argument of grounding gestures does seem nostalgic for a referential anchoring – a variant of monologism. However, the human body and its relation to its environment is seen as a consistent 'grounding gesture' even in virtual reality, which is defined by Den Tandt as a process accomplished in phenomenal time and space by human subjects and is therefore metarealistic.

[they] carry out the multi-layered negotiation of reality within their own textual apparatus.’<sup>103</sup>

What is noticeable in Den Tandt’s text is the absence of any use of the word ‘intertextuality’ (although ‘intertextual’ does appear). I suspect this is deliberate in order to distance Julia Kristeva’s use of the term from his blueprint for a post-mimetic dialogical realism. Kristeva’s intertextuality (which differs from Barthes’s) relates to the interdependence of literary texts with all those that have gone before, where the ‘transposition’ of discourse or sign systems creates ‘new articulation’, not just an echo of an earlier voice, and is essentially part of a wider psychoanalytic theory that questions the stability of the subject.<sup>104</sup> The possible confusion of association around this word could, therefore, destabilise Den Tandt’s claims for the contemporary realist project.

There seems to be some similar territory in Den Tandt’s proposal here for dialogical realism with Jameson’s ‘cognitive mapping’ as a long-term Marxist project to make the world knowable and ultimately transformable, in the face of the postmodern pastiche, or ‘borrowing from anywhere without commitment to anything, satire without any bite’, as Mark Fortier has phrased it.<sup>105</sup>

## **6 – Towards performing realism**

Den Tandt puts out a call ‘to open up the boundaries of the realist mode to accommodate texts whose bond to social reality is not secured by reflectionist mapping’ (in other words, texts that are not attempting to represent everyday life may also be employed in a realist mode).<sup>106</sup> He suggests that post-mimetic realist practice involves works that rely on predominantly ‘meta-discursive’ and performative devices, departing from (although not wholly abandoning) Jakobson’s referential function of discourse. Den Tandt cites Gilles Deleuze on cinema in support of this argument. Deleuze views film neither as a language

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>104</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

<sup>105</sup> Mark Fortier, *Theatre/Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 177.

<sup>106</sup> Den Tandt, *On Virtual Grounds*, p. 12.

system nor a language but as a ‘plastic mass’ and ‘non-language material’ displaying various modalities of movement.<sup>107</sup>

Forming in Den Tandt’s experiment, similar to Jameson’s emergent discourse of affect, is the development of a taxonomy. In his introduction, Den Tandt sets out some of his new terminology, which I can summarize as follows: ‘metarealism’ comments on the means whereby the representation of the social field is accomplished; ‘historiographical metafiction’ playfully investigates the paradoxes raised by the representation of the past; ‘performative realism’ designates a practice that actively intervenes within the social field, where its non-reflectionist strategies are most explicitly illustrated in politically focussed interventions. Examples given are Augusto Boal’s ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ (‘guerrilla’ and ‘silent’ theatre are variants of social intervention), documentaries by Michael Moore, ‘mockumentaries’ such as those by Sasha Baron Cohen, as well as Parkour<sup>108</sup> running which engages the social and physical environment. ‘Performative reconceptualization of realism’ is defined as being less about producing a replica of the ‘human life world’ and more about evoking this ‘field’ performatively, by means of an act of persuasion where ‘formal realism’ is reconceived as rhetorical elements.

There is a paradox here that Den Tandt attempts to address by citing those who have critiqued performativity as deconstructive of realism’s supposed claims to representing reality. For example, Roland Barthes’s ‘reality effect’ or ‘realist illusion’ is said to rely on deceptive, illusionistic symbolic action. Jean Ricardou, Gérard Genette, and Tzvetan Todorov are also cited as dismissive of ‘realist performative gesturing’.<sup>109</sup> Richard Rorty’s concept of human experience as a sequence of ‘speech acts’ or ‘performative illocutionary effects’ proclaims these are incompatible with truth.<sup>110</sup> Den

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<sup>107</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Continuum, 2011 (1985)), p. 28.

<sup>108</sup> Parkour is normally an activity carried out in urban spaces, developed from military obstacle course training, which involves seeing one’s environment in a new way, and imagining the potentialities for navigating it by movement around, across, through, over and under its features. The discipline became popular in the late 1990s and 2000s through films, documentaries and advertisements. ([www.parkouruk.org](http://www.parkouruk.org).)

<sup>109</sup> Den Tandt, *On Virtual Grounds*, p. 15. Den Tandt cites Roland Barthes, ‘L’effet de reel’; Gérard Genette, ‘Vraisemblance et motivation’, *Figures II* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), pp. 71-99; Tzvetan Todorov, *Poétique (Qu’est-ce-que le structuralisme 2)*. Seuil Points 45 (Paris: Seuil, 1968), pp. 36-7.

<sup>110</sup> Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Truth, however, is a contested notion. Den Tandt asserts: ‘The search for truth begins when contractual practice seems inadequate or inauthentic – when the social performance of reality



Tandt groups Richard Rorty with Judith Butler and Michel Foucault as those who do not endorse the idea that ‘discourse reflects reality by virtue of a relation of adequacy between thought, language and the world’.<sup>111</sup> In other words, there can never be a wholly accurate description, true story or even a *mot juste*. Can you then do, or perform realism? From the above position on performativity, the answer seems to be ‘yes’ to a realism, like expressionism or naturalism, that is identifiable as a style, method or set of performative gestures. But perhaps this is a misconception of realism, or at least a preoccupation with its shifting forms.<sup>112</sup> I am inclined to agree with the view that there is a trans-historical aim to realism, as Raymond Tallis has argued in his book *In Defense of Realism* (1988).

The charge that realism tries to copy reality has been dismissed by others preceding Den Tandt. Raymond Tallis’s impassioned book, mentioned above, makes the compelling argument that realism in fiction is an expression of reality *not* a representation of reality in words.<sup>113</sup> His view is critical of *mimesis* as a term associated with realism in that it muddies the aims of realism, which he sees as ‘referring to, reporting on, doing justice to, celebrating, analyzing and being constrained by reality not replicating, mirroring, reproducing or copying it’.<sup>114</sup> Tallis formulates his own view of the realist writer as composing ‘in three dimensions: the forward movement of narrative, the spread of setting, and the explanation of character; or distance, width, and depth’.<sup>115</sup> The twin desires to tell the story and realise a setting for the in-depth exploration of characters creates a tension (foretelling Jameson’s *Antinomies*) which Tallis identifies as two conflicting desires of the writer: to create form and to be true to reality. He affirms:

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only covers a limited perimeter of experience, or when hitherto acknowledged referential genres have lost their capacity to act as contractually validated charts of reality.’ *On Virtual Grounds*, p. 190.

<sup>111</sup> Den Tandt, *On Virtual Grounds*, p. 15.

<sup>112</sup> Manfred Kerkel’s seminal book, for example, employs structural and thematic analysis of over 60 operas between 1890 and 1930 to distinguish tendencies in *l’opéra naturaliste* towards the representation of social types and conditions of life in Western society in the long nineteenth century. The citation of folk music traditions characterizes Kerkel’s identification of *naturalisme* whereas collage and levels of reality also feature in *realisme*. Italian *verismo* undergoes similar interrogation and, Kerkel argues, prioritises aesthetics over ideology in giving free rein to flights of passion and lyricism, in contrast with the French *vériste* tendency.

<sup>113</sup> Raymond Tallis, *In Defense of Realism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1988), p. 33.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

For the writer who wishes to do justice to reality, rather than merely tell a tale, or who wishes his telling to take on the shape of reality itself, there is a constant quarrel between the factual reality outside the novel and the formal reality within it.<sup>116</sup>

For Tallis, there is an essential function of realist fiction to help us imagine what we know; in other words, realism is an ‘imaginative extension of experience along lines laid down by knowledge’.<sup>117</sup> It is the practice of looking more closely at what we know, reminding us of it and transforming that knowledge into experience, as a means of imagining ourselves into what we do not know and what we believe could be. He asserts that the reality described in a great fiction stands metonymically for a larger reality or infinite realities (anticipating Jameson’s ‘eternal present’). Motivating this assertion is the idea that imagining the actual (a plausible, relatable reality as opposed to a ‘fantasy’) honours and redeems our instinct that we do not see ourselves or experience the world as others do.<sup>118</sup> Different people find different things strange. What is true for one person may not be true for another and yet we can imagine, empathise, and feel to a degree, what another might experience and formulate as true. This is a notion that I will return to in subsequent chapters, discussing the material of opera and its performative layers, such as imagining into other bodies, *mise-en-abîme* or ‘self-embedment’, and the extent to which stakeholders identify with material and embodied roles.

Den Tandt identifies a suspicion among sceptics that realism ‘loses itself’ when it scrutinises its own strategies (is self-reflexive) or privileges speech acts over its critical function of ‘specular’ (mirror-like) representation. His proposal is that metarealism and performative realism set out to define or re-inscribe ‘the norm’. Normative definitions tend to be unpopular with some postmodernists. Yet, the attraction of the performative and metarealist paradigms is their ‘promise of freedom anchored in scepticism and indeterminacy; they open the prospect of a discursive environment able to refashion itself indeterminately from one moment to the next’.<sup>119</sup>

Den Tandt cites modern Marxist critic Roger Garaudy’s call for a ‘[b]orderless [r]ealism’,<sup>120</sup> but claims that a realist mode without boundaries is untenable, invoking

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., pp. 207-212.

<sup>119</sup> Den Tandt, *On Virtual Grounds*, 15.

<sup>120</sup> Quoted in Luc Herman, *Concepts of Realism* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1996), 148.

Auerbach and Lukács for whom realism is defined in contrast to other discursive modes, such as those that sanction a literal belief in the supernatural, idealistic illusion or a narrow definition of reality.<sup>121</sup> Leo Bersani's definition of realism which affirms that the 'boundaries set by realism are forces that naturalise the prejudices of the upper-middle classes or the biases of eurocentrism', is one of reality paralysed by fear and desire, from a neo-historicist position.<sup>122</sup> Den Tandt interprets this position, along with others, as overstating realist boundaries as acts of existential or political repression.

The paradox of realist speech acts exists where hybrid texts *as a whole* are capable of supporting realist strategies. Den Tandt uses the example of magic realism, which is itself problematic and much written about as antirealist. Magic realism has been defined as both socially referential and postmodern (de-familiarising) since it demystifies historically and ethnically constructed definitions of reality in the way it suspends identification with the fictional world; there is a lyrical or poetic function to the 'magic' elements of an otherwise 'realist' narrative.<sup>123</sup>

Den Tandt sees similarities in such a reinterpretation of Bakhtinian dialogism in Habermas's reflections on 'communicative action' (how actors 'reach understanding' about 'states of affairs'),<sup>124</sup> and Donald Davidson's concept of 'interpretive charity' (a generosity towards interpreting what another expresses, crediting them with some insight) in Pam Morris's *Realism* (2003).<sup>125</sup> Den Tandt acknowledges, however, Habermas's theory of communicative action is much critiqued, especially in the light of Foucault's theories around structures of knowledge, language and power.<sup>126</sup> To my mind, this latter point recalls the assertion in *The Substructure for a European Common* that there is value in a shared culture of signs where there is interplay of socialisation, qualification and subjectification, however, Den Tandt affirms there is no truly level-

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<sup>121</sup> Raymond Tallis, in his *In Defense of Realism* (191-193) draws boundaries with fantasy as a form, which would not hold with Den Tandt's more liberal definition of a metadiscursive realism.

<sup>122</sup> Leo Bersani, 'Leo Bersani on Realism and the Fear of Desire', ed. Lilian R. Furst, *Realism* (Harlow: Longman, 1992 (1969)), 240-260.

<sup>123</sup> Jose David Saldivar, 'Postmodern Realism', *The Columbia History of the American Novel*, ed. Emory Elliott, Cathy Davidson et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 521-541.

<sup>124</sup> Jürgen Habermas, 'Actions, Speech Acts, Linguistically Mediated Actions, and the Lifeworld', *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, ed. Maeve Cooke (Cambridge: Polity, 1999 (1988)), pp. 215-56.

<sup>125</sup> Pam Morris, *Realism*, The New Critical Idiom (London Routledge, 2003).

<sup>126</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power', *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and Writings 1972-1977 by Michel Foucault*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980), pp. 109-33.

playing field for enacting the European ideal of democracy. Neither does an unbiased meritocracy exist:

Realism unfolds as a sequence of cultural and semiotic negotiations carried out both within the textual fabric of separate works and in the broader social and historical environment in which texts are embedded.<sup>127</sup>

A contemporary realism, therefore, must show how even non-mimetic or anti-realist texts support a process of inter-subjective, dialogised knowledge building. In other words, working in a dialogical mode, this new form of realism brings together a number of different strategies for how to trigger ‘negotiated disclosures’, or revelations of a shared sense of what is plausible and true.<sup>128</sup>

## 7 – New territory for realism

Den Tandt’s argument requires us to zoom out from a close-up on form (the novel) to take in the global picture, like the lens on a satellite camera or the zoom in/out function on Google Earth. Globalisation for Den Tandt, as for Jameson, is the main challenge to the intelligibility of the ‘social field’. The object of realism in the present context is:

The politics of space of global capitalism and specifically the difficulties in perceiving the latter’s spatial and social configuration on the basis of phenomenal experience.<sup>129</sup>

Den Tandt cites Pam Morris’s contention that nineteenth-century realism (and naturalism, or the representation of everyday life) was intensely concerned with ‘geographical dislocation and unsettlement’ caused by modern life. Den Tandt then cites Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, positioning realist analysis as severely problematized by the struggle to map ‘the impossible totality of the [late twentieth-century] world system’.<sup>130</sup> Den Tandt positions Jameson, however, as hopeful of seeing a realist idiom emerge able to form his ‘cognitive mapping’ of the postmodern socio-economic landscape.<sup>131</sup> One wonders if Den Tandt is attempting to answer Jameson’s call by formulating his own blueprint.

Space, then, is ‘the final frontier’ (to coin a phrase from the American TV franchise *Star Trek* – an example of Den Tandt’s more visibly emergent contemporary

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<sup>127</sup> Den Tandt, *On Virtual Grounds*, p. 25.

<sup>128</sup> Den Tandt details more of these in his so-titled Chapter 7 of *On Virtual Grounds*.

<sup>129</sup> Den Tandt, *On Virtual Grounds*, p. 20.

<sup>130</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 38.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51; Pam Morris, *Realism*, p. 144.

realism of the 1960s). Or, rather, our bodies in, experience of, interconnectedness with, and conception of space are the territory of contemporary realism in any artistic medium. Den Tandt cites Baudrillard's 'desert of the real',<sup>132</sup> referred to in his *Simulacres et Simulations* (1981), brought to cinematic life in the 1999 film *The Matrix*.<sup>133</sup> Homi Bhabha's 'Third Space' of postcolonial global politics also comes within the realm of contemporary realist concerns.<sup>134</sup> Foucault's 'heterotopia' (other-space) in the mirror<sup>135</sup> and Bakhtin's 'chronotope'<sup>136</sup> (time-space) are very much a part of the territory of contemporary realism and the language Den Tandt employs to discuss it.

Heterotopia is defined as a spatially focused variant of dialogism and polyphony; it articulates the hope that 'art may render perceptible the existential and social configuration of multicultural societies'.<sup>137</sup> According to Den Tandt, heterotopianism remains a 'fragile utopia', contextualised with reference to the twentieth-century heterotopian theory from the field of anthropology: the so-called 'Sapir-Wharf hypothesis'. In brief, this implies that different language systems generate different worldviews. Den Tandt argues that this means to describe a general feature of sign systems – a general truth – phrased in the idiom of a particular worldview. Therefore, the hypothesis can only be true within its own linguistically specific worldview. Den Tandt also cites Donald Davidson's argument about the issue of 'translatability' – that if different language systems truly generated different worldviews it would be impossible for any linguistic community to acknowledge the existence of other languages and other worldviews. The Sapir-Wharf hypothesis, therefore, in the exercise of comparing

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<sup>132</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulations* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1981), p. 10.

<sup>133</sup> *The Matrix* (1999). <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133093/combined>

<sup>134</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>135</sup> The mirror is an object, in itself inhabiting one space, which through reflection suggests another.

<sup>136</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel', *The Dialogical Imagination*: 'Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic *generic* significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time. The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic.' p. 2.

<sup>137</sup> Den Tandt, *On Virtual Grounds*, p. 281

languages and cultures, covertly employs Davidson's more general prerogative of 'inter-translatability', implicitly renouncing an absolute heterotopianism.<sup>138</sup>

Den Tandt acknowledges that it is now seen as unworkable and politically unpalatable to express social reality truthfully within a single voice of 'cognitive authority' (such as what he calls 'classic realism'); however, Davidson's critique of Sapir-Wharf suggests that 'heterotopianism as a political or literary credo, cannot shake off its own covert monologism.'<sup>139</sup> In declaring this logical impasse, Den Tandt goes on to note that paradoxes limit all forms of philosophical commitments, including his own argument in defence of a contemporary dialogical realism which is based on the principle of cognitive trust and relies on its own metadiscursive, reflexive dimension: 'metarealism must in other words make clear which kind of life-world best supports realist investigation. It pursues this result by playing off several world configurations against one another [...] to sustain determinate, centripetal dialogical exchanges'.<sup>140</sup> In other words, a contemporary realist approach self-consciously tailors methodologies best suited to apprehending the situation. Den Tandt continues to set out his notion and taxonomy of how 'closure' or consensus is only achievable if combined with his notion of the 'reality bet' (a wager on the possibility of truth). This he calls 'metadiscursive heterotopianism', which I would suggest is akin to a leap of faith based on self-conscious, reasoned propositions and agreed-upon parameters. I understand this to be something like the process in which a director and designer might conceive of the imagined situation of an opera production, for a cast to then explore, develop and embody.

In characteristic fashion, Den Tandt proceeds to define his proposed four figures of closure: the dialogical compact, the body of cognition, the commonwealth, and the biosphere.<sup>141</sup> Each of these figures may operate simultaneously but 'closure' boils down

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<sup>138</sup> Den Tandt, *On Virtual Grounds*, p. 282

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 283

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> Den Tandt's 'dialogical compact', following Habermas's theory of 'communicative action', is the assertion that 'discursive negotiations legitimise the promise of convergent dialogism'. 'Cognitive embodiment', as a central tenet of cognitive linguistics and aesthetics, is proffered as legitimising aspects of realist praxis that use or involve materiality. This would resonate with Jameson's textual reading of cultural artefacts and mechanisms of 'figuration' or allegory. The 'commonwealth' is the concern for truth, social justice and the emancipation from mystifying and reifying mechanisms in the social field. The 'biosphere' is meant to link the theory of realism to developments in eco-criticism, given the context of environmental concerns over the equilibrium of life itself. (p.290)

to an appeal to a sense of community on the one hand, and to a respect for materiality on the other. Den Tandt deems the material to be weightier and more confining than the social, although the experience of this seems questionable to me for some, in the light of contemporary radicalising ideologies, issues around social freedoms relating to racial and gender identity, or psychological terrorism perpetrated over the Internet. Social communities, however, are embedded in time and space, their accounts shaped in part by material factors. Thus, Den Tandt concludes – in spite of not easily dovetailing with the categories of class, gender and ethnicity – realist praxis is validated by the old-fashioned and specific interweaving of nature (in its material sense) and culture.

In relation to this conclusion, I have had a number of discussions with colleagues, particularly singers, around just how much set or costume is needed to stage and tell the story of an opera to a contemporary audience. This, of course, picks up on Peter Brook's seminal discussion of what constitutes the stage and theatrical space in his examination of four modes of theatre in *The Empty Space* (1968), although I am arguing that the mode in which the operatic form is made has moved on somewhat from his *Deadly Theatre*. The question of materiality, however, continues to be a relevant one for directors, designers and opera companies, in the light of funding production costs, the logistic and technical parameters of co-producing, or touring to multiple venues.<sup>142</sup> Just how much material reference is needed to support the imaginative world generated with the music and performers? Is it possible to tell certain stories without certain referential objects?

As part of my own project and discussion, in my case study chapters, I will develop Hedda Høgåsen-Hallesby's observations of 'the active processes of "operatic hermeneutics" to fill and produce spaces'<sup>143</sup> based on Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991); the latter asserts that metaphorical space is always informed by the experienced, and physical space cannot be understood outside processes of representation.<sup>144</sup> I shall interrogate my own work on a specific operatic production of

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<sup>142</sup> The large proportion of most production budgets invariably goes towards paying for the performers, but the initial outlay for a new main scale production is considerable, hence the powerful economic incentive of co-productions.

<sup>143</sup> Hedda Høgåsen-Hallesby, 'Seven Veils, Seven Rooms, Four Walls and Countless Contexts', in *Performing Salome, Revealing Stories*, ed. Clair Rowden (Ashgate Publishing Ltd: Farnham, 2013), pp. 134-154.

<sup>144</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 16.

Handel's *Ariodante*, revived a number of times in different countries between 2016 and 2019. I then focus my second case study on George Benjamin's opera *Written On Skin*, through my directorial practice of creating a number of semi-staged international concert tours with different casts, conductors and orchestras. The scores of these operas were first publicly performed in 1735 and 2012 respectively. This will constitute a deliberate focus on how contemporary realism as a trans-historical mode (rather than a particularly nineteenth-century phenomenon) may be seen to aspire to a mandate. I therefore wish to bring this discussion of realism and performing realism to Den Tandt's dialogical relationship of a 'spiritual' and psychologically consistent human evolving in conjunction with the inconstant and shifting social and geographical environment.<sup>145</sup>

Realism, according to Den Tandt, aspires to individual self-reflection through communion with the 'greater' self, brought into play within the social realm. The notion of 'communion', particularly with regard to the 'greater' self (to which one can 'awaken' through shifts in perspective, to borrow a term from Buddhism), is one I will return to, in relation to my own creative practice, music and in the context of my working relationships in the making of opera productions. In pursuit of the dialogical mode, through ethnographic methods derived from sustained participant observation of the groups and companies with whom I work, and interviews with many of my colleagues, I will interrogate the potential value of dialogical realist praxis to the individual and society. Mindful of the pitfalls of generalisation, this will be an exegesis of specific productions in time, community and location, and offer a plurality of voices and perspectives through quoting many of the practitioners directly involved, across disciplines.

## **8 – Towards a manifesto for the future of realism**

For Den Tandt, the mission of twenty-first century realism is:

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<sup>145</sup> Den Tandt develops Auerbach's notion of a phenomenological realism traversing intercultural communities with historical identities in his essay 'Return to Mimesis: George Lukács and Erich Auerbach in the Wake of Postmodernity', *Return to Postmodernism: Theory-Travel-Writing-Autobiography; A Festschrift in Honour of Ihab Hassan*, ed. Klaus Stierstorfer (Universitätsverlag Winter: Heidelberg, 2005), pp. 61-78.



- To chart and scrutinise the reified wasteland of global consumerism or the ‘desert of the real’: the virtualisation of social relations as a result of the technological reconfiguring of communication.
- To render account of the multicultural diversity of most contemporary societies through dialogical methods.
- To open up discursive and aesthetic negotiations that seek to resist the lure of ‘cognitive arrogance’ (or the belief of being ‘right’), yet remain attentive to social, discursive, and physical constraints that bear upon the course of attempts to represent ‘the truth’.<sup>146</sup>

Den Tandt voices an awareness of potential detractors to his blueprint project. The materiality of discourse and complexity of signifiers is a key issue for him, as is advocating an integrationist conception of art and the world, as opposed to a segregationist one.<sup>147</sup> He speaks of accommodating a scale of views of realism, from ‘artless snapshot at one end to pure textual artefact at the other’.<sup>148</sup> In this respect he seems to be echoing Jameson’s chromaticism in the experiencing of affect.

Den Tandt asserts his blueprint for a post-mimetic dialogical realism requires belief that the process is convergent by nature and oriented towards consensus.<sup>149</sup> There must also be ‘a reasoned commitment to the possibility of closure’ - the existence of this is beyond proof but ‘trusting oneself to its possibility is not irrational. It is indeed a core requirement of realist mapping’.<sup>150</sup> In this I hear an echo of the ideal of European ‘democracy’ alluded to in the Flemish academics’ report on the European ‘common’, cited earlier in this discussion in relation to cultural value. The messy and imperfect practice of striving for a possible ‘meaningful disagreement’, where conceptual formulations, beliefs and linguistic meanings may safely overlap and be tested against

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<sup>146</sup> Den Tandt, *On Virtual Grounds*, p. 31.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 22. He is referring to Lilian Furst’s terminology from *All is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 23. In chapter 7, Den Tandt sets up an opposition between two antagonistic perspectives on signification in photography and film: Pierce and Deleuze on cinema and indexical imprint (natural and iconic signs) versus Saussurean semantic construction of montage as a source of meaning; in other words, a dichotomy between recording what is there (existing outside) and a selective, conscious focus of montage generating meaning.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>150</sup> Den Tandt, *On Virtual Grounds*, p. 26. See also Donald Davidson’s theories of cognitive trust in ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’ *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001 (1974)), pp. 183-98.

one another, I shall argue, has some resonance with the environment of preparing for an opera production, in that it requires an element of self-investment and self-searching in dialogue with a shared, or ‘common’ resource. The material of opera may be positioned as a field, that it is possible to be both inside and exterior to, in that practitioners ‘commune’ with a score in their individual preparations before entering the dialogical community of rehearsals and performance. Indeed, Den Tandt cites Donald Davidson as having maintained that ‘intertranslability’, or a bridging space, as such, exists and is available to theoreticians and, more importantly, subjects in everyday life.<sup>151</sup> I shall argue that the expediency and event of an opera performance provides a particular point of focus with which to examine Den Tandt’s criteria for and faith in dialogical realism.

I am reminded at this point in a discussion that has turned towards belief (in evaluative, democratic spaces), of Jameson’s convictions in the un-provable (his historic emergence of affect, mingling with progress, to produce realism in the nineteenth century) as well as his charting of the ‘waning of affect’ (throughout the latter half of the twentieth century) in the cool fascination for the reified store of images and codes generated by contemporary culture.<sup>152</sup> Den Tandt appears more tentative in his experimental terminology. He describes his belief, or trust, in the possibility of reaching consensus through dialogical means as ‘the reality bet’.<sup>153</sup> To make a bet is performative as opposed to constative language, and holds within it both agency and the potential for social change.<sup>154</sup> Implicit within the notion of performance, and protagonists who wager on a shared sense of reality, is the capacity for the subjects to reposition themselves with regard to the totality of their ‘life world’. I shall suggest later in this study that the environment of rehearsing for a performance of opera is also evolving a kind of ‘reality bet’, an act of faith, based on what Den Tandt would call a ‘reality contract’<sup>155</sup> that

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>152</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 10.

<sup>153</sup> Den Tandt, *On Virtual Grounds*, pp. 138-74.

<sup>154</sup> John L. Austin, *How to Do things with Words (William James Lectures)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

<sup>155</sup> For Den Tandt, implicit transactions make up the ‘referential contract’ (pp. 186-187). Performative negotiations make up ‘the reality contract’: the perception and negotiation of all layers of reality result from the practice by which the world is woven together inter-subjectively (texts serve as tokens in an on-going transaction enabling societies to fashion their concept of reality). Both ‘referential contract’ and ‘reality contract’ must function simultaneously. This is messy and inherently problematic to dialogism and it is often because of these discrepancies that realism claims to open up an authentic search for truth.

requires a certain level of consensus amongst practitioners, and indeed the audience, for communication to be of meaningful value in performance. For those directly involved in the making of opera, I will argue, this agency comes not only from existential angst but also cognitive appraisal and pragmatic intervention.

In chapter 7 of his monograph, which Den Tandt titles ‘Negotiated Disclosers: The Core Functions of Dialogical Realism’, he sets out characteristics for the myriad forms of metadiscursive realist practice, developing a metaphor from the language of computer technology for his dialogical matrix. This ‘operating system’ comprises all the basic representational gestures, attitudes and strategies employed to carry out a negotiated mapping of the reality in question. Its ‘hardware’ is the material semiotics of realist practice, realism’s referential apparatus, gamut of signifiers, discursive structures, media through which discursive methods are carried out. Its ‘regulating protocol’ is the principle of validity legitimising successful referential investigations, a reasoned negotiation of the ‘reality bet’. The dialogical matrix and material signifiers must be mutually supporting in their pursuit of truth and there must also be a commitment to an assumption that the process of negotiated disclosure is not inherently open-ended, or at least reaches closure at a certain point.

At the end of his introductory conceptual framework to *On Virtual Grounds*, Den Tandt offers, like Jameson, a smattering of his rapidly expanding new list of terms. The following is an extrapolation from Den Tandt’s blueprint for what realism in practice today must be:<sup>156</sup>

1. **Heuristic (fact-finding):** investigative, researching. Mapping is a good example of this.
2. **Reflexive (metadiscursive):** for example, through the use of *mise-en-abîme* (self-embedment), pastiche and hybrid codes.
3. **Contractual (regarding reference and reality):** implicit transactions make up the ‘referential contract’. Performative negotiations make up ‘the reality contract’. Both must function simultaneously.
4. **In praxis (action-oriented):** testing the limits of physical feasibility and the

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<sup>156</sup> These are ideas expressed mainly in Chapter 7, although they are elaborated on and expanded in other chapters of his experiment, *On Virtual Grounds*.

practical contingencies of situated-ness. Following the logic of the ‘reality bet’ (which is a performative act of faith that consensus can be reached dialogically) praxis looks more closely at what we know, reminding us of it and transforming that knowledge into experience. This is a means of imagining ourselves into what we do not know but what we believe could happen given the imagined circumstances. Do we buy it in practice?

Importantly, this offers the prospect of measured optimism. Taking stock of the world’s complexity by following the logic of the ‘reality bet’, the horizon (the resistance it opposes to investigation) must be staked out pragmatically instead of being set pessimistically. Rather than subscribing to the pessimism of a fatalistic view of the postmodern condition, ‘phenomena otherwise attributed to complex forces might be shown to possess an explanation in human terms after all’.<sup>157</sup> This chimes with Jameson’s hopes for ‘cognitive mapping’,<sup>158</sup> informed by the confidence that a multi-layered, multi-perspectival practice may encourage, not undercut, the perception of a given environment. ‘Realist negotiations [...] should avoid both the muteness of the simulacrum and the infinite transit of ‘signifiante’ and ‘différance’ [*sic*]. They should steer the negotiation of visual evidence toward a configuration that yields ascertainable results.’<sup>159</sup> In other words, without discounting the richness of ambiguity, the existence of simultaneous perspectives and paradox, realist negotiation should reach an agreed upon congruent expression of something plausible, as opposed to nebulous or endless interpretative possibilities that cannot be pinned down. This involves choice in performing interpretation.

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<sup>157</sup> Den Tandt, *On Virtual Grounds*, p. 195.

<sup>158</sup> I address Jameson’s project of ‘cognitive mapping’ directly in my chapter on Theory and Method.

<sup>159</sup> Following Jaques Derrida’s and Julia Kristeva’s use of these terms. *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200.

## 9 – Lifting realism off the floor

Equipped with such a conceptual compass to navigate the various maps that make up dialogical realism as a mode, I venture towards the material environment of opera productions and consider the reciprocity of theory and research methodologies in my own creative practice.

I carry with me two further pieces of equipment. The first is a memory, from witnessing a production of Shakespeare's play *King Lear* (which I was studying for A level in 1990), directed by Kenneth Branagh and designed by Jenni Tiramani for the Renaissance Theatre Company. Along with two extraordinarily embodied performances (from Emma Thompson as the Fool and Richard Briers as Lear) it was the design of the space that has stayed with me, described by Martin Hoyle in the *Financial Times* thus:

Lear's Britain is illuminated by sconced torches. The curved metallic wall is punctured by hexagonal openings of assorted sizes and a high, round opening: a stylised planetarium, the unyielding firmament, malign stars and baleful moon. The gravelly pebbles that cover the floor [...] At the beginning of 'Lear' they outline the shape of Britain so that attendants can scoop partitions through the triply divided kingdom, Lear can scabble furiously through Cordelia's portion, and subsequent violence can scatter and grind the island map into chaos under foot.<sup>160</sup>

This visual metaphor will serve as a reminder of the psychological perils of foolishly obliterating previously drawn maps, particularly given the partially detonated minefields and quicksand of realisms already out there. I liken my survey of the literature thus far reviewed to the archaeological discipline of map regression cited at the beginning of this essay, where differing representations of terrain, albeit shifting, are overlaid, and liken my turn to the material environment of opera productions to orienteering, where information within generalised and thematic maps is combined for purposeful navigation, much like performance itself.

The second tool I take with me is my practice of Nichiren Buddhism, which informs my own daily life and professional creative endeavours. Buddhism, as a self-disciplining practice oriented towards a revolution of the human being<sup>161</sup> has much in

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<sup>160</sup> *Financial Times*, 11 August 1990, see:

<http://www.ahds.rhul.ac.uk/ahdscollections/docroot/shakespeare/performanceDetails.do?performanceId=11427> [accessed 10/5/2016]

<sup>161</sup> 'Human revolution' is the term used by second Soka Gakkai President Josei Toda to describe a fundamental process of inner transformation whereby we break through the shackles of our 'lesser self,' bound by self-concern and the ego, growing in altruism toward a 'greater self' capable of caring and taking

common, I will argue, with the contemporary realist desire for agency and meaning in an age of conceptual schemes, ‘post-factual’ delusions (such as those witnessed in the campaigns around the UK referendum to leave the European Union), the ‘non-space’ of postmodernity and object-oriented ontologies where the human being has been decentred. Indeed, the ‘human revolution’ is an individual discipline and a social process:

Only within the open space created by dialogue, whether conducted with our neighbours, with history, with nature or the cosmos, can human wholeness be sustained. We are not born human in any but a biological sense; we can only learn to know ourselves and others and thus be trained in the ways of being human. We do this by immersion in the ocean of language and dialogue fed by the springs of cultural tradition.<sup>162</sup>

Following this, I assert a belief in the power of music and opera to open spaces in which genuine dialogue, that necessarily requires us to listen, can lead to a clearer perception of ourselves, the world’s sounds, and to agency; however, in my experience, that does require a magnanimity of spirit and an act of faith.

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action for the sake of others—ultimately all humanity [...] There are all sorts of revolutions: political revolutions, economic revolutions, industrial revolutions, scientific revolutions, artistic revolutions...but no matter what one changes, the world will never get any better as long as people themselves...remain selfish and lacking in compassion. In that respect, human revolution is the most fundamental of all revolutions, and at the same time, the most necessary revolution for humankind. <http://www.sgi.org/about-us/buddhism-in-daily-life/human-revolution.html> [accessed 6 June, 2016]

<sup>162</sup> Daisaku Ikeda, *Buddhism Day by Day: Wisdom for Daily Life*, (Santa Monica: Middleway Press, 2006), p. 166.

## Chapter 2

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### **Theory and Method**

#### **Summary:**

In this chapter I interrogate the reciprocity of theory and creative practice, detailing my own directing and research methodologies. I reflect on my own creative practice as an opera director working internationally in the twenty-first century, situating my work within a discussion of an established and evolving theoretical landscape and my personal practice of Buddhism.

## Theory and Method

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### 1 – Praxis

#### 1.1 – Practice as research, auto-ethnography and the case study

Robin Nelson's seminal book *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* (2013) was a first port of call for me in designing and carrying out this project as 'practice-based'. Nelson's emphasis on 'intelligent practice', journeying from practitioner to practitioner-researcher in the arts and within academia, provided a useful manual for navigating the various stages of my PhD. I followed his recommendations for scheduling periods of literature-based research; creative practice and field work (directing shows, writing fieldnotes and recording semi-structured interviews) as case studies; transcription of interview scripts and their analysis (using Critical Discourse Analysis); reflection and analysis of creative output both at the time and in hindsight, and the analysis of the reception of creative output (e.g. in show reviews, also using CDA); reflection and revision of the project design in response to changing circumstances; presenting conference papers, writing and editing my thesis. The inclusion of semi-structured interviews and their analysis was a deliberate and important part of this dialogically designed project; I wanted the research to give voice to and be grounded in practitioner knowledge. It then became evident how dialogic processes were intrinsic to my creative practice. In particular, Nelson's model for arts praxis – in which theory is imbricated within practice – and diagram of the multi-mode, dialogical and dynamic 'Modes of knowing' have informed my approach to structuring the present study.<sup>163</sup>

*Research Methods in Theatre and Performance* (2011) edited by Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson also deserves to be acknowledged. This important book provided a

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<sup>163</sup> R. Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 37.



context and background for ‘how research “methods” and “methodologies” might be reconceptualised for theatre and performance studies by thinking philosophically, procedurally and practically about working processes that resist unhelpful dichotomies and fixed binaries which separate embodiment and intuition from intellectual practices, emotional experiences and ways of knowing.’<sup>164</sup>

In his book on *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (2013), so called ‘New Materialist’ Tim Ingold argued the distinction between ethnography and anthropology, fully aware of the disciplinary backlash he faced:

Anthropology is studying with and learning from; it is carried forward in a process of life, and effects transformations within that process. Ethnography is a study of and learning about, its enduring products are recollective accounts which serve a documentary purpose.<sup>165</sup>

Ingold also argues, following sociologist C. Wright Mills, that there can be no distinction between the theory of a discipline and its method; rather, both are ‘part of the practice of a craft’, where:

...its method is that of the practitioner, working with materials, its discipline lies in observational engagement and perceptual acuity that allow the practitioner to follow what is going on, and in turn respond to it. This is the method, and the discipline, known in the trade as *participant observation* [...] to open up a space for generous, open-ended, comparative yet critical inquiry into the conditions and potentials of human life.<sup>166</sup>

In articulating the mutual dependence between participation and observation as a way of knowing ‘from the inside’, Ingold insists that the practitioner-researcher is always and necessarily ‘part of the world in its differential becoming’.<sup>167</sup> Ingold contends that both maker and material encounter one another in their respective ‘flows’ of consciousness and form: ‘joining forces’ as ‘an image’ in the flow of consciousness, and as ‘an object’ in the flow of material. I find Ingold’s idea of ‘correspondence’ between the minds of makers and the material world persuasive and resonant to my experience of working in the performing arts. In my role as a stage director I work with both ‘materials’ (scores, texts, sets, costumes, props, light and so forth) and people in processes of ‘becoming’;

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<sup>164</sup> B. Kershaw and H. Nicholson, *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 2.

<sup>165</sup> T. Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 3.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., p.4. (Emphasis in the original.)

<sup>167</sup> Barad, K. *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2007) p. 185 quoted in Ingold, T. (2013) p.5

actual and virtual elements are ‘entwined’ through rehearsals of opera productions. Performances themselves are then experienced as ephemeral moments unfolding ‘in correspondence’ with the attentions of an audience. Opera productions are generated from preparation and rehearsal for such embodied encounters in performances, even if they are then recorded and transmitted as an ‘image-object’ to be experienced via other media, such as through cinema broadcasts on screens, or as part of a broader seasonal cultural programme.

As an opera director engaged in a research project about realism in opera, I have been conscious of and interested in my own reflexivity. From this position of bias, I attended an academic conference hosted by the Institute of Musical Research in London in April 2018, entitled ‘Beyond “Mesearch”: Auto-ethnography and self-reflexivity in music studies’. A certain discomfort was articulated around the role of theory and formal methodology in attempting to establish theoretical underpinnings to personal experience.<sup>168</sup> Various perspectives were offered on the friction and tensions perceived within the discipline of musicology by performer-researchers between the emic (insider) and the etic (outsider), which became a major theme of discussion throughout the two-day conference.

In delineating emic and etic boundaries, it follows that practitioner responsibilities towards stakeholders need to be identified. These include commitments to practitioner communities (including themselves), funders, audiences, and frameworks of assessment (within professional and educational contexts), as well as their respective hierarchies. At the Institute of Musical Research conference I attended, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) within Higher Education, for example, was deemed unhelpful in separating research impact from other forms of impact (e.g. performance). One question that remains relevant to both professional and academic environments is how much information performers and performances *need* to provide an audience, as well as identifying who those audiences are. Another is whether it is desirable to explicate or extend artistic choices in the first person. In the current climate, Neil Heyde (RAM) as a

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<sup>168</sup> Heyde, N. Keynote address: ‘Why? What? Where? Questioning the responsibilities of researchers and environments in self-reflexive work’. Conference title: *Beyond ‘Mesearch’: Auto-ethnography, self-reflexivity, and personal experience as academic research in music studies*, Institute of Musical Research, Senate House, London. 16-17 April 2018.

performer, academic researcher and educator suggests a need to go beyond the ‘navel-gazing’ of so-called ‘mesearch’ by critically framing auto-ethnographic inquiry and acknowledging the way documentation is privileged and credited within academic discourses and hierarchies.<sup>169</sup>

Auto-ethnography might be described as self-documentation (following Ingold’s definition of ethnography) that can have a procedural, cathartic or therapeutic purpose in and of itself; this acquires wider relevance through self-critical practices, cultural contextualisation and critical writing on practice, when identifying audiences.<sup>170</sup> Therefore, in practice as research there is the constant challenge of ‘being’ both the researcher and an intrinsic part of the researched community (how Ingold defines anthropology). There is the very question of language in its broadest sense, and the issue of documentation: translation from the haptic, aural and visual to the linguistic and its tools of analysis. Opera as an art form, directors and casts must grapple with these issues of documentation, translation and adaptation as they aspire to bring together all manner of means with which to express both emotion and conceptual thinking, through embodied knowledge in performance.

Embodied knowledge may not translate well or accurately into a written reflection, or verbal legitimisation of ‘being’ in another mode (musical, visual, choreographic, etc.). Yet, this embodied knowledge or ‘habitus’, in the sense of Bourdieu’s use of the term, if unquestioned, may become part of a culture of compliance, or orthodoxy within a particular art form. Since contemplating Jameson’s Marxist dialectic in the course of my research into theories of realism,<sup>171</sup> I am minded to agree with Bourdieu’s assertion that dialectic of heterodoxy and orthodoxy is intrinsic to any vibrant practice.<sup>172</sup> A certain amount of self-reflection is vital to practice, indeed, contributes to distinguishing it from habit. I position my research into realism in opera, therefore, as a timely period of reflection into my own practice and particular creative environment. It is timely for me, at this point in my life and career, and timely also for

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Pace, I., Keynote address: ‘Spin, Self-Promotion, Institutional Recognition, and Critical Performance: Notes from the diary of a performer-scholar.’ *Beyond ‘Mesearch’* conference (2018).

<sup>171</sup> Jameson, F., *Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013)

<sup>172</sup> Bourdieu, P., *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

the international opera communities of practitioners, scholars and audiences as they evolve in dialogue with considerable societal changes.

Although I am not a performer on stage (my performance in opera is assessed throughout rehearsals by my colleagues, publicly by the press and by audiences to performances), my ‘insider’ involvement with opera as a director presents particular ethical challenges in relation to my professional role and relative position of power, alongside advantages of access to my field of research. Operatic performance is multi-modal and increasingly intermedial (mixing digital and live elements) with a theatrical capacity to be a hypermedium that ‘stages’ other media.<sup>173</sup> My role as stage director (working with the multi-modality of opera) offers opportunities for a multi-methodological approach that feels appropriate to my research on realism as a mode of production, or way of working.

Research-practitioners from the International Federation of Theatre Research (IFTR) have attempted to map territory under development in areas such as ‘intermediality in performance’ which, following Deleuze’s notion of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation, structures written sections/sectors of its book form as ‘portals’ offering themed ‘gateways into the network, which afford a range of situated perspectives’.<sup>174</sup> Respectively, each portal offers access to ‘nodes’, or key concepts, illustrated by a ‘cluster’ of terms and definitions, together with ‘instances’, or case study examples from practice. The layout of the book deliberately employs cross-referencing to terminology within its own pages (as would a ‘user’ manual) in mostly words and supporting visual images, as it attempts to enable the reader to navigate the network of dialogic concepts. There are merits to this form of research presentation, in that structurally the book attempts to reflect how its contents function. Ironically, as the writing principally deals with elements of digital culture and their use in live theatre, it reminds me of Jameson’s allusion to Cubism as a modernist form of realist strategy: explicitly attempting to express three dimensions through the limitations of two. Whilst I have chosen a mixed methods approach to my research, I shall not, however, follow this

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<sup>173</sup> Kattenbelt, C., ‘Intermediality in Theatre and Performance: Definitions, Perceptions and Medial Relationships’ in *Cultura, Lenguaje y Representación / Culture, Language and Representation 6 (La Intermedialidad / Intermediality, 2008)*, pp. 19-29.

<sup>174</sup> Bay-Cheng, S., Kattenbelt, C., Lanvender, A., & Nelson, R., *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press (2010) p.9.

conceptual-structural approach to presenting my findings as I think it becomes overwhelming and self-defeating to attempt to represent entire networks of connections; rather, I have chosen to take the idea of the map as a conceit and use it to interrogate my own practice, which I have found a more liberating path to agency.

## **1.2 – Making maps**

Mapping can be seen as a form of (auto)ethnographic documentation, a creative and research methodology, as well as being political, performative and, as Deleuze and Guattari have claimed, ‘entirely oriented towards an experiment with the real’.<sup>175</sup> Opera productions, like musical notation itself, can be seen as a set of boundaries around a set of potential interpretations; operas are idiomatic maps. I explore this idea in detail, examining practical forms and applications of mapping, throughout my first case study chapter that focuses on a contemporary production of Handel’s eighteenth-century opera *Ariodante*.

Alongside my practice of directing opera productions, I have recorded my observations and critical reflections in and around rehearsals as field notes. I have chosen to focus my analysis of realism as a mode, or way of working, on two productions with which I have been involved as an insider. In these case studies, I draw from field notes and contemporary critical theory to give context to my reflections, with the benefit and critical distance afforded by hindsight, and with access to other ‘maps’ such as promotion and reception material, press reviews and digital videos.

Meanwhile, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with fellow creative practitioners working in opera and have transcribed many of these conversations and dialogues from recordings. Most of these have been with colleagues involved in and at the time of my two case studies, with some others made during work on other productions to which I occasionally make reference. I have made transcriptions of conversations with members of casts, production teams (directors, designers and their assistants), music staff, stage management and technical departments as well as artistic directors and members of administration.

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<sup>175</sup> Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F., *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) p.12. Originally published as *Mille Plateaus*, vol. 2 of *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1987).

With reference to transcripts, the methods of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as a variant of Jameson's adaptation of philology to the social text, have been useful in analysing how speech acts and signifiers prioritise certain narrative interests. I have, therefore, employed CDA in my analysis and discussion of interview transcripts, and in organising material thematically around participants' core values and those common among my sample group. The application of CDA as a form of mapping complements the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) as a communication theory for understanding social worlds through the coordination and coherence of multiple narrative perspectives. CMM informs a dialogical worldview that recognises the distinction and inter-relationship between the actual story we live and narrative accounts of the world, in their socially constructed multiplicity. This worldview, it is claimed, cultivates a spirit that treats 'others' with respect and tolerance, an attention to the co-creation of social worlds through actions, and not using others for our own purposes.<sup>176</sup> Thus, it has felt appropriate to this study's aims of interrogating 'dialogical realism' as a method of making opera productions to employ the combination of CDA and CMM as tools with which to navigate how creative practitioners speak about what they do.

One aim of opera is that everyone, hopefully, works towards producing the show within personal, artistic, cultural and economic parameters. There are inevitable narrative clashes in what that might mean, and one area of my interest is how those narratives compete and how they might be brought towards consensus; I employ the communicative perspective of CMM in the analysis of my case study productions. This includes the close reading of production scores, video recordings and other generated media around the productions such as rehearsal field notes and transcript excerpts from interviews with colleagues, in order to map how, in both process and product, 'performing realism' might function and where its continuing challenges lie as a way of working.

In analysing why particular interpretative choices are privileged over others in my case studies, I discuss concomitant theoretical frameworks and concepts in order to situate my experience within a broader cultural discourse linked to society, audiences and

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<sup>176</sup> Barnett Pearce, W., 'The Coordinated Management of Meaning' in William Gudykunst (ed.), *Theorizing Communication and Culture*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004), pp. 35-54.

notions of value. Engaging with multi-modal methods to my research is intended to yield dialogical results; I understand this to be a critical realist approach.

Additionally, there is the evolving notion of ‘performance’.<sup>177</sup> There is much to say about this, but in the current chapter on theory and method, I wish only to make a connection between my thesis of ‘performing realism’ and ‘truth’, with reference to Dhunpath and Samuel’s important book on *Life History Research: Epistemology, Methodology and Representation*. On the back cover to this book, it is stated that:

Knowledge production is inextricably linked to representation. In the process of articulating their findings, each author made particular representational choices, sometimes transgressing conventional approaches. The book explores why these choices were made and how the choices influenced the kinds of knowledge generated. The book provides theoretical justifications for these transgressions and reflects on how the experience of representation helped disrupt the authors’ essentialist notions of research production and for whom it is produced.<sup>178</sup>

Accordingly, beyond the forensic search for positivist facts, the personal truth of experience and the dialogic truth sought by a critical realist’s approach, Dhunpath and Samuel detail a fourth category of ontological truth that is restorative, transcending structure and prioritising ‘agency’ in the realm of the social and in service to others. For my own part, at this point in my life and work in opera, I find value in this fourth realm of ontological truth that is ‘performative’ on a personal level, and on the level of social engagement; I wish to make a positive contribution and bridge between the communities of opera professionals and those who are interested in opera; I feel a responsibility as a contemporary practitioner and ‘custodian’ towards this extraordinary art form, in service to others and society.

Faith in the realm of this performative and restorative truth resonates for me with Stanislavski’s foundational *belief* in ‘imaginative truth’ in theatre.<sup>179</sup> I see a parallel strategy in Den Tandt’s theoretical formulation of the ‘reality bet’ in contemporary, dialogical realist cultural forms. Allied to critical academic inquiry – characterised as sceptical, questioning and scrutinising whilst respecting and attempting to remain open-

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<sup>177</sup> As Deleuze and Guattari also suggest: ‘the map has to do with performance’, *A thousand Plateaus*, p.12.

<sup>178</sup> Dhunpath, R. and Samuel, M. (eds), *Life History Research: Epistemology, Methodology and Representation* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009)

<sup>179</sup> ‘Truth on stage is whatever we can believe in with sincerity, whether in ourselves or in our colleagues. Truth cannot be separated from belief, nor belief from truth.’ Stanislavski, C., *An Actor Prepares*, (England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1967) pp. 122-123. First published in USSR in 1926.

minded – the combination of these approaches to truth forms my core thesis and investigation of ‘performing realism’ in opera, as praxis. Operatic performance, in this sense, draws on a range of topographical cartographies and forges new pathways (albeit ephemeral ones); ‘performing realism’, in other words, becomes an act of orienteering.



## **2 – My own directing methodology**

### **2.1 – Preparation: from first encounter to first production rehearsal**

Since my Master's degree in Theatre Directing (1996-98), over many years of assisting other directors and directing my own work, devising productions of theatre and opera, I have developed a mixed bag of methodologies and approaches. Some directors attempt to follow a particular method, based on written and taught practices, however, in my experience, all the professional directors I know employ mixed methodologies in a way of working they have personally evolved to suit them, their particular skillset and vision for making theatre. Of course, experienced and established directors evolve directorial styles and tropes, often around recurring themes of interest, favoured methods and approaches to material. Two prominent but very different directors have influenced my own approach: the highly idiosyncratic Richard Jones and the controversial Katie Mitchell (who has published her own narrative account of her directorial process), largely because I worked closely with them both over a number of years and have assisted, collaborated on, revived or adapted their productions many times, but I have borrowed from too many directors to remember them all.<sup>180</sup> What follows here is an account of my own working methods and process, which I first considered writing down when teaching on a design for opera module at the conservatoire in Wales (RWCMD), working with student designers new to opera, as a means of preparing them (and me) for us to work together in a reflective learning environment.

When I have been the director of a new production, after the initial elation of having been asked by a company to create one, I have felt an overwhelming sense of responsibility and have prepared for initial conversations with my first and primary artistic collaborator: a designer. Preparation is key even at this stage.

My first collaborator will be the set designer. Although often this person will also design costumes as well, I find the earlier the creative conversation with collaborating

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<sup>180</sup> Katie Mitchell's book *The Director's Craft: a Handbook for the Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2008) is a detailed, systematic, and highly pragmatic account of her directing practice, from preparation through to rehearsals and the business of getting a production into the theatre and in front of the public.

designers begins, the better. Once the parameters of the production have been set (where, when, casting and budget) I would bring in costume and lighting designers as early as is helpful to the process. This will necessarily involve information about the circumstances of the commissioned production, such as venue, scale and production budget, audiences and other practical information, but this will be kept in the background during the development of ideas phase. If I do not already know the opera, I spend at least a week or two just listening to a recording of it (if one exists) and/or reading the libretto.

I consider my working process before meeting with designers as cartographic, more or less as follows depending on the circumstances, timescale and budget of the production:

1. I listen to a recording of the piece alongside reading the libretto (and following with a score, if available) making notes in the libretto and highlighting any references to scene location, stage direction, props, physical descriptions, costume and anything that raises questions about setting and what might be happening during instrumental sections of the score. If I have a score at this early stage to work with, I will start to divide it up with page markers, annotating it with paste-it notes (although this quickly makes a score bulky, it means I can move ideas around and transfer them to other documents I will compile in the course of my preparations).<sup>181</sup>

2. I make a note of anything I think I do not understand, that I think is difficult to solve, or that I have an immediate idea about.

3. I list what I think the themes of the piece are - as a way of focusing and filtering detail.

4. I create a scene breakdown of the piece with columns for the following: recorded timings, *dramatis personae*, briefly what happens, location and time of day, a column for questions/ideas (mine will be about all elements of directing the

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<sup>181</sup> See Appendices, case study chapters and physical scores made available for examples.

piece and be added to throughout the process, but I encourage my design team to create their own breakdown based on mine), any resonances or references to other material.

5. I compile factual information about each character from the libretto and other sources as relevant, note any distinguishing traits, including what other characters in the piece say about them.

6. I begin reading around the work and compile a reading list of relevant material as well as any visual references drawn from books, film, television, the Internet, conversations and any other sources. This can be endless, so there comes a point at which I have to stop consciously doing this and make decisions about what I want to concentrate on (usually determined by the production schedule).

7. I carry a notebook to jot down ideas that can come from anywhere and at any time; I think about this in terms of creativity as non-linear consciousness. I keep listening also to a recording, while doing other unrelated things. Working on multiple projects concurrently can also stimulate cross-fertilisation.

Below are some initial questions I consider and keep referring back to:

1. What are the themes of the opera? E.g. Love, faith, politics, betrayal...
2. Who are the characters in it and how do *I* feel about them?
3. What are the contexts, historical and performance conventions, references, performance history, contemporary political influences and artistic movements? Does the opera follow or break with conventions of the time in which it was written? Is this different from when the opera is set? Why? I try to understand something of these before deciding if they are useful or interesting to my own encounter with the opera, what I bring to the project and what resonates with me.
4. Does the opera suggest literal, metaphorical, conceptual readings, dream and/or multiple/plural realities? How and where specifically?

5. What are the locations? Which elements need to be represented scenically for the action/plot to take place? (A frequent example is somewhere for someone to 'hide' from someone else.) Do they need to be fully 'realised' as actual in the design, suggested, or referred to as 'imagined' off-stage?
6. Is there a plot? What is the plot? (The 'plot' is the sequence of events – not necessarily revealed in chronological order – as communicated by the 'narrative', which is *how* the 'story' is told.) What events take place off-stage? What are the events that need to be staged? What are the tensions and turning points in the drama?
7. What happens during the orchestral instrumental sections when there is no singing and perhaps fewer stage directions (such as 'dances')? How do I understand and visualise the stage directions? What are we looking at? What is implied in the score/what do I infer from the music?
8. How is the opera structured? Eg. Is there an overture, arias, duets, choruses, scenes, acts...?
9. What has been said or written about it? How has it been done before? Is this helpful to me?
10. What does it make me feel, or think about and visualise when I listen to it? I try to be specific with each section or change that I identify.

Once I have begun work in this way - the devil is in immersion and the detail - I meet with a designer to discuss practical details, feelings and ideas about the piece. All of the above would then be on-going during the design process, which for me would focus in each meeting on working through the opera scene by scene, until we are working on the same 'wave-length', through to creating a white card model for initial feedback from a technical and budgetary assessment of the design (where things may still change quite considerably). The final delivery of a fully rendered model box begins a process of costing the design build, with negotiated modifications. It is important to me to have a clear idea of what we want to say about the opera with the production design, which I can then present, develop and work towards realising with the cast and conductor. The design process can take weeks, months or even years depending on the scale of the production,

budget and schedule of the build. Typically, for a main scale production for a major opera company, the lead-in time is at least a year, often two or more. Following delivery of the model box, there is often a process of design modification, based on costing the build. The production rehearsal period will typically begin in a studio with a piano, either on a mark out, mock-up or the actual set, depending on the circumstances, and last between two and five weeks (depending on the length and complexity of the opera, the production, whether it is being done for the first time or is a revival, and so on) before transferring to the performance space for technical and orchestral rehearsals. Again, the amount of stage time for rehearsals varies according to the circumstances, but time available to work with the chorus, technical elements and orchestra, for example, are certainly factors that test the parameters of production ideas and a producing company's resources.<sup>182</sup>

## **2.2 – Two key directorial maps: the scene breakdown and the back history**

A key document map that merges detail from the opera with a vision for how to stage it is the scene breakdown. I will typically begin creating this in the form of an Excel spread sheet alongside divisions and sketches (on post-it notes) I make in a vocal score. An important component of the scene breakdown, and column of the spread sheet in my process, involves giving a title to each scene that describes what I think it is essentially about, or encapsulates an idea I have had for how to stage it. It is a skill that takes time to hone and sometimes titles need to be revisited if they are not clear to others who use the document, such as designers, assistant directors, music staff and stage management teams. This creates shorthand and focuses discussion and ideas with collaborators. Often naming sections within scenes also facilitates our group thinking.

Dividing up an opera score into rehearsal chunks that everyone can refer to, performers and stage management especially, once we get to production rehearsals, saves a lot of precious time and repeated explanations. Marking up the rehearsal vocal score by titling sections and naming units of action or movement sequences once in rehearsal is then an on-going practice that helps performers to map their motivational routes through

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<sup>182</sup> For an accessible and insightful animated video of the process involved in generating an opera production on a large scale, see Aix-en-Provence Festival's Pop-up Opera animation available on the Opera Vision website library page: <https://operavision.eu/en/library/oper-machen/pop-opera#>, last accessed 19/6/2019.

scenes. Titling sections also helps with remembering blocking (character movement through the set at specific points in the score) and musical phrasing.<sup>183</sup>

Another key document map is the back history of the characters and their environment, or the metanarrative of the production. This is created from a combination of sources: the libretto text, invented subtext and researched paratexts and contexts. There are directors (I am one) who will decide upon many details in the back history and draw up a chronology of imagined events to share with the cast at the beginning of rehearsals, more frequently in opera than with plays, in order to save time in having to discuss and decide upon these as a group.<sup>184</sup> These constitute sets of ‘givens’, to use Stanislavski’s terminology. They elevate the director’s vision and set parameters for the production but are then added to or modified during the process of production rehearsals. Unanswered questions arising from ‘facts’ in the back history might be put on a list, to suspend their investigation, save time, and serve the exploration of other ideas (usually the ones the director wishes to privilege, i.e. his/her own). The list of suspended questions, if never referred back to, might then threaten to undermine the cast’s willing suspension of disbelief in the production’s constructed narrative; cast members may not be able to fully embody their roles when questions are left unanswered or answered unsatisfactorily. Their performances will be professional renderings of what they have been asked to do, rather than their own genuine investment in imaginative truth. In reflecting on past experiences, I would suggest that the odds of Den Tandt’s ‘reality bet’ are more consistent with dialogical processes (rather than entrenched positions) that build a collective faith in a director and conductor’s abilities to shape the narrative, as well as the cast’s abilities to embody their roles.

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<sup>183</sup> See the Appendices to my first case study for an example scene breakdown of *Ariodante* for company use.

<sup>184</sup> Generally speaking, operas are rehearsed in much less time than plays. Typically, studio time can be four to six weeks for plays, three to four weeks in the studio for a new opera production, followed by a week or so of technical and orchestral rehearsals in the theatre, but revivals frequently get much less time. Rehearsal periods for revivals of opera productions can be alarmingly short, relying heavily on the consummate professionalism and skill of everyone involved, which is perhaps why they have a reputation for being hit and miss. Plays are often previewed to run them in before their official ‘press night’, whereas operas open on their first night in front of an audience and usually run for far less performances.

### **3 – Revivals not reproductions**

#### **3.1 – Archaeologies of performance and map regression**

The preparatory work and maps created the first time an opera production is made become primary resources rather than definitive templates for revivals. In revivals there is always the issue of how the production was done before. This can serve or hinder the whole process, depending on the accuracy of memories, recorded information and the shifting of creative resources and goalposts. This is especially the case if results were achieved at the expense of something. Money counts, but often in the underfunded arts (where artistic aspiration always exceeds resources) the greater cost is to people's health or good will, which in my experience is rarely measured, documented or heeded by those not directly affected. In this section, I follow Jameson's idea that an imagined future may be divulged from a present excavation of texts already made,<sup>185</sup> whilst borrowing from Archaeology the method of map regression or overlaying newer maps with older ones in order to 'rediscover' the whereabouts of something 'lost' to the present.

Revivals are usually programmed with reduced company resources allocated to them; they are something of a known quantity and will often be stored and 'filed' with technical and casting information, in another form of administrative mapping. The assumption that productions, once made, are a known quantity is often 'dangerous' to their artistic quality as it can easily lead to complacency, or worse: regarding revivals as of secondary value to new productions when it comes to the allocation of a company's resources. For example, there will be an advanced schedule from the company that should detail the number of chorus sessions allocated to the rehearsal of the particular opera production being revived (negotiable to a degree if the director is engaged well in advance). The advanced schedule shows when chorus sessions are available, dates of orchestral sessions with the conductor, numbers of stage piano and orchestral rehearsals, and so forth. The nearer to the start of production rehearsals, the less negotiable and moveable these sessions become, because of contractual and financial reasons. Knowing

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<sup>185</sup> Jameson develops this idea in *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005).

these facts early enough to be able to flag potential problems is key, but also is the expertise to be able to foresee issues in the production schedule.<sup>186</sup>

The challenge here is joining up the thinking from all departments concerned and keeping everyone in the communication loop of when changes are made. Cross-referencing previous records with current planning helps to limit the impact of reduced rehearsal time or decisions made in ignorance by one individual or department of their knock-on effects to the rest of the process. Cast and conductor pre-contractual non-availabilities (NAs) are often an issue that has to be factored in for any rehearsal plan to succeed, especially when there is less and less room for anyone ever to be ill. Typically, music staff, the director and production teams, as go-between roles that need to mediate the concerns of ‘upstairs’ strategic planning and the coalface ‘delivery’ of projects, have to be good communicators and negotiators, as well as map readers and makers. There is a necessary application of critical skills developed through the close reading of scheduling documents, in order to decipher the situation and navigate it successfully. Perhaps, in this respect, there is some similarity to Jameson’s application of contemporary Marxist theory to the reading of cultural texts. There is also an element of Den Tandt’s realist dialogical interaction necessary around the schedule, as agreement needs to be reached in order to unite everyone’s efforts, although I would not call this particularly democratic. Consensus is somewhat dictated by other parameters, such as what else is scheduled for the season, budgets, set and costume-making schedules, chorus and orchestra contracts, and then by the director and conductor once rehearsals actually begin. Opera productions can involve a lot of people and the ‘machine’, once set in motion, can be slow to turn, which is why the lead-in time for planning opera seasons can often be years in advance of their public announcement.

If I am the revival director, ideally, I will have been involved in the original production in some capacity (either as director, associate or staff director); however, this is not always the case. My first port of call, whether I was involved in the making of the original production or not, is to listen to and watch a video record of it (if one exists). These vary enormously in the quality of recorded detail but have become the standard

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<sup>186</sup> See Appendix for an example of a production schedule see accompanying USB stick: PhD Production files and other maps: Ch.4 Ariodante: Ariodante Production Schedule Chicago.



resource for everyone working on a revival, as much as for co-producers as for promoting the production to prospective hiring companies. Alongside watching the video, I will follow the production book and amend it, annotating additional information useful for score-bound rehearsals and the process of ‘blocking’ the opera (working through scenes physically in the space with the cast) within the first couple of weeks. Preparing and becoming familiar with the production book myself, before commencing production rehearsals, can and has taken anywhere from between about a week for me to absorb enough to work from (where the book is excellent) and three-months (where the book is non-existent and I have had to reconstruct an entire production book that was lost from a poor VHS recording of a dress rehearsal, where 20 minutes of the show was missing because ‘someone’ forgot to change the tape).

It has been standard practice for some time to have the video on DVD or other digital format available in rehearsals, or in a room nearby, which is very useful as a technical reference. Personally, I find more disadvantages than advantages to this, as the orientation of the rehearsal becomes about reproduction rather than revival, with a slavish over-reliance on a flattening and reductive record of the live production. Moreover, I find a reliance on the video displays a lack of respect for the artists in the room (who are often different from the original cast or company). I do, however, find it useful to refer back to the DVD once I have blocked scenes with revival casts, as this brings refreshed eyes, alternative solutions to difficult staging, and possible refinements to my attention; often new triangulations and discoveries come through this kind of ‘map regression’. Some singers want to see how a production was done originally on a DVD, and sometimes this helps if time is short, production detail is high, and the singers are on the ball, but this is still contentious among directors.

Additionally, I try to consult and compile what supporting paperwork exists from the staff directors’ and stage management files and records of performances of the production, particularly with a view to noting modifications to the set, props, or costumes and for any known technical issues. I will map out the beginning of rehearsals, and a draft rehearsal schedule plan for the whole of the production period that will allocate time and people to reviving a production. Increasingly, opera companies I have worked for have requested at least the entire first week of rehearsal calls to be detailed, albeit published

subject to change. In a two, three or four-week period of studio rehearsals (depending on the opera and overall company schedule), my aim will be to sketch out the geography and blocking of the whole production as quickly as possible within the first week or two.

The accuracy and level of detail in the production book is key to the first stages of a revival in my own process, which is heavy on input from me with the cast and can be extremely draining if teaching the production to whole new casts and choruses. My own process (time permitting) is to work through tidying up the whole production book, comparing it with the video record, before rehearsals begin. I then re-familiarize myself with the book before each rehearsal, focussing on material for that session, so that I can hold as much detail in my head and short-term memory as possible, reducing the amount of time that I am score-bound in rehearsal, so that I am freer to engage with the cast and adapt the map to them as necessary. In my experience, singers (principal casts and choruses) like to be given 'geography' first, as it anchors what they have learned musically to a physical space, and then they can think and feel their way through the blocking. I will work systematically and methodically in some detail, section by section, when setting out scenes: working through sections, giving performers notes on their interpretations, then consolidating new blocking by running what we have rehearsed. This initial stage I liken to the way an archaeological dig might be pegged-out for excavation. It is always preferable to have pegged out principal cast moves in scenes with the chorus *before* a chorus session in which, for everyone's sanity and the sake of efficiency, the focus will be on working with the chorus.

The principal singers' work following this stage in the process should take place partly outside of rehearsal, with the need for some time in between sessions on the same material for scenes that have been 'pegged out', for the seeds of ideas about them to 'germinate', 'percolate' or 'cook'. Casts and choruses, depending on levels of preparation, ability, conscientiousness and professionalism, will return to scenes having thought about them and remember, with a little reminder, a lot of what was initially set, so that more exploration of scenes, characters and relationships can be undertaken. The staff director should document the blocking from the first rehearsal, updating with newer versions, as scenes are refined throughout the process of both the studio and stage rehearsals. Amongst the many other tasks their role demands of them, such as note taking

and assisting the director by standing in for missing bodies, as well as scheduling rehearsal calls, the assistant director's maps in the form of the production book for later revivals becomes crucial.

On the first revisiting of scenes, as a revival director, my focus is for the cast to develop ownership of the scene. That evolves as a process in which singers navigate and negotiate the blocking and ideas about character, in order to get both music and staging into the *thinking* behind moves within the set and world of the production. This is different from when creating blocking in a new production, where it is generated from ideas and impulses the director and cast have already internalised in their preparations, but are trying out for the first time in a new encounter with the production space (be it on the set, a mock up, or mark out), with each other, and with no pre-drawn production map. In new productions, this early stage of rehearsal can be exploratory and more improvisational, around agreed starting points, such as in setting tasks, activities, locations and circumstances within which scenes can then imaginatively evolve. In revivals, where time is increasingly eroded from production schedules, this phase of the work is often omitted altogether.

If there is time to revisit scenes a second and third time in the studio, perhaps in the context of running scenes together, the process can go deeper in investigating the thinking that underpins a singer's performance of their role. Where specific motivational maps to scenes have been generated, further 'ropes' to guide performers through scenes, or Stanislavskian 'super-objectives' can then be projected, much as musical phrasing might be shaped, and integrated into performances.<sup>187</sup> These allow performers to move more freely through scenes, remaining 'alive' to exploring the nuances of moments that have already been integrated into their thinking. Super-objectives offer some security in knowing that even if this 'liveness' takes them off-piste; performers can confidently re-route their way back to significant moments that have been successfully rehearsed, with a guiding 'through line'. Confidence in a good map instils a certain freedom to enter the 'flow' of 'being in the moment'. The effect of giving time to this process, in my opinion, is an investment in the level of commitment to production ideas and in 'shining up' those

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<sup>187</sup> Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* (London: Penguin, 1967) Chapter 15: 'The Super-Objective', p.248-256. (First published in USSR, 1926).

ideas to deepen faith in the metanarrative world of the production. With reduced rehearsal time for revivals this is often the stage that gets compromised the most and leads, in my mind, to the much criticised ‘wooden’ acting, or conventional operatic gestures that distance audiences less familiar with opera from identifying with or experiencing empathy for operatic characters.

In revival situations, once the cast becomes more confident of their blocking, I will focus on giving feedback in notes on character and motivation, giving my attention to the thinking behind every discernible moment of the scene, with a view to the legibility of character thoughts and production ideas to an audience. This requires a great deal of watching, attention to detail, focus on acting and *mise-en-scène*. I would argue that this is one of the main skillsets of a good director, honed over thousands of hours: developing a director’s eye. The focus on the quality of acting in opera, I think, is appropriate when the production is oriented towards investigating believable behaviour and relationships, albeit in a heightened operatic idiom. Undoubtedly, the increasing fashion for casting plausible actor-singers has been influenced by the proliferation of the image through cinema, television, and marketing as well as broadcasting stage-productions of opera. Therefore, because of this familiarity with the semiotics of the screen, a certain amount of naturalism in acting (reproducing the actions of daily life ‘in close up’ and real time) is once again in fashion, in combination with ‘the poetic’, heightened or imaginative gestures possible in the theatre and opera house. This fashionable combination, I believe, aligns with Den Tandt’s blueprint for post-mimetic dialogical realism, which combines what he calls ‘classic’ realist techniques and styles, such as naturalism, with ‘contemporary’ or ‘postmodern’ realist strategies.

Where an opera production’s emphasis is more on ideas, pictures, choreography and spectacle, and less on naturalistic or believable behaviour, I would suggest it deliberately steps away from ‘the mimetic’ as an imaginative extension of human experience. Yet, ‘psychological congruence’ in a production may also be served through means other than naturalistic acting, such as in surreal or expressionistic gestures that take it further into the realm of the poetic. This is arguably the strength of a theatrical or operatic idiom and would be a case of Jameson’s aims of realism achieved via Cubism, or Den Tandt’s ‘post-mimetic’ dialogical realism, which employs multiple stylistic features

appropriately tailored to expressing imaginative truth in a moment or situation, such as in magic realism.<sup>188</sup> As an already heightened idiom, contemporary performances of opera are characteristically subject to this kind of treatment, following Den Tandt's blueprint contractual parameters of the realism in question and the acceptance of their terms, such as: the acting is not overly wooden, or too frequently broken by the need for singers to constantly be looking at the conductor, which does remain challenging for audiences and opera-makers alike.

### 3.2 – Embodying rehearsal cartographies

In mapping scenes with singers, I set out blocking with them first: methodically plotting through where changes of thought occur to me, where in the score people might move, and why. This is the start of the process, which I tailor to the amount of time we have to stage the opera. If there is time for more in-depth work, I employ rehearsal techniques adapted from theatre games and exercises, tailoring them to the environment of opera. I have developed a number of bespoke techniques, beyond discussing and speaking through scenes without the music, paraphrasing in the native languages of the performers, and other such approaches I might take working with students and less experienced singers.

One such rehearsal exercise for opera singers, once blocking and motivational maps have been set and mostly remembered, is to physically run the scene 'telepathically': effectively, the cast will physically perform the scene in silence, without any music accompaniment or voiced text. I have adapted the exercise from Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*.<sup>189</sup> I have found the technique particularly useful in cover rehearsals, where singers must respect the blocking of the main cast so as not to 'undo' the production or 'throw' their main cast colleagues during a performance, as there is rarely time for rehearsal if they have to step in and perform. Equally, I have found this

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<sup>188</sup> Magic realism is the example from literature Den Tandt gives for his 'post-mimetic dialogical realism': 'Their magic components...engage the social environment through defamiliarizing speech acts: they function as performative warning signs triggering a suspension of epistemological certainties. By depicting characters who must accept paradoxical or counterfactual situations as real, magic realism develops a form of performative metadiscourse obliging readers to suspend their identification with the fictional world and to reflect about the limits bearing upon the construction of knowledge in a cultural environment that appears fragmented and heterotopian for determinate historical reasons.' *On Virtual Grounds*, pp.17-18.

<sup>189</sup> Boal, A., *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (London: Routledge, 1992).

exercise useful in the latter stages of a main cast studio rehearsal period. The singers will begin in silence and act (*not* mime) the scene in the space, to the musical soundtrack in their heads. In order to facilitate this and focus on the internal-external dialogue of thoughts between characters, I will suggest that singers make a physical gesture of some kind to signal each of their own changing thoughts. This gesture could be a purely mechanical one, such as a click of the fingers, or tap of a foot or hand on another part of the body, or they could choose to inflect the gesture with the quality and temperature of their thoughts. A physical and audible signal of thought changes really helps in the definition of operatic blocking as often singers are not in eye contact with each other or are down stage facing out (more often than not for acoustic reasons); an audible register of other people's thought changes in the scene can be helpful for maintaining connection to the silent soundtrack of the music in their heads. It is important before running the exercise to point out that a change in thought might be generated from a character's own text, someone else's text (or subtext), or another scenic event (internal or external). Thoughts do not stop when a character stops singing. There should be silence and focus given from everyone else in the room that helps heighten the performers' levels of attention and concentration. In running the exercise, there is usually a lot of finger clicking, which tends to intensify everyone's levels of concentration.

One effect of registering thought changes with 'mechanical' movements of the body (for some performers) is to help to physically chart a scene in a way which grounds it in their bodies. This develops the process of 'actioning' units of thought, so that each unit is given a verb to characterise it, much like an actor would do following Stanislavski's approach, and which runs alongside the score bar by bar, what they sing and internally voice for themselves.<sup>190</sup> Another benefit of the exercise is to expose any holes in the performers' observation and thinking about the scene, as well as any gaps in the legibility of those thoughts to an outside eye. It should result in performers concentrating on the rhythm of their own character's thoughts, with a heightened awareness of other characters' rhythms. Furthermore, this will highlight a lack of connection between performers (most noticeable when the telepathic connection breaks,

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<sup>190</sup> See Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares*, Chapter 7: 'Units and Objectives'.

the scene runs aground, or the performers lose where they are in the scene with each other).

There is still a tendency, in my experience of working with less accomplished actor-singers, to rely on the music to carry them through scenes; the rigour of the thinking about character, situation and acting takes second place to that of the music. Without the technical mastery of the music, of course, this is quite natural, as everything will fall apart without it. This exercise is designed to increase performers' sensitivity and attention to physical exchanges and the body language of their colleagues. It can also be useful as a catalyst for an elusive 'chemistry', or at least the verisimilitude of it, between performers. I would suggest that the dialogical strategies of 'performing realism' in opera are there to bring acting and singing closer together, so that it is indistinguishable which is leading at any one time. If anything, to an outside eye, the thought of the performer-character creates both the music and movements on stage.

I ask singers to share and relay their experience of the above exercise immediately after trying it. I then give detailed feedback from watching them, before we run the scene again 'with music'. It has proven remarkably successful as a technique to stimulate connection between performers, increase the detail of their own thought maps through scenes and liberate moments of thought-clusters, where there are perhaps competing internal voices for their attention in the moment (a particularly tricky musical pick-up with the conductor, a fiddly moment with a prop or costume that needs to be a certain way, a particular language issue or inflection of a word, and so forth.).

Often the immediate effect of the 'silent scene' exercise on then running the same scene with music is that the conductor is much happier. David Parry, a British conductor with a very keen interest in staging, said to me after rehearsing the Act I Carmen-Don José duet in this way for Scottish Opera in 2015, that he was fascinated by this rehearsal method and that it was 'a revelation'. In my experience of working in this way, it is necessary to run the scene with music straight away, as this consolidates any discoveries and exposes further issues, particularly around the tempi of thoughts and how performers think about physicalizing and 'filling' extended phrases, instrumental moments and repeats with 'real time' thinking.

A further development of the ‘silent scene’ exercise as a means of embodying maps is to work with what Stanislavski terms ‘super-objectives’, or overarching character motivation. It is important that each cast member voices his or her own super-objective(s) to a scene, so that they understand what they are committing to and shape their own phrasing. I draw singers’ attention to the dramatic phrasing of scenes through the trajectories of character thoughts and intentions as concomitant with musical phrasing. Without losing any of the detail of the moment-to-moment blocking of thoughts and actions, I work (where appropriate) with singers on ‘temperatures’ to scenes; using an energetic scale (typically of 1 to 10, or low to high on a scale of importance) we attribute the stakes of a situation to how intensely a character desires their objective. This helps in locating turning points in scenes, what the dramatic tensions are between motivational lines and the temperature of collisions and evasions. This is not for everyone and I use it sparingly. It requires a lot of mental agility from singers and patience from music staff for any resulting mistakes, which can then be noted and discussed. Some singers really enjoy the exercise and it unlocks them from technical thinking, while others get less from it; however, I have found it helpful as a relatively nuanced, shorthand rehearsal language for balancing varied performer energies and performing styles.

Opera casts are frequently drawn from different performance backgrounds, traditions and cultures. One person’s idea of an ‘8’ will be another person’s ‘5’ or ‘9’ and this relates to an individual’s internal energy scale, and perception. Also, the translation of internal feeling to external communication varies. Some performers may feel like they are giving a ‘9’ but it reads to me as a ‘5,’ or exaggerated and mannered. The tools of measurement are highly subjective, but their use can be methodical and revealing when it comes to constructing a consistent performance aesthetic and balance of energies on stage. This is where a director’s outside eye can help. With a particularly gifted group and time, I have employed this exercise as a game, using playing cards (where an Ace is low and all picture cards are a value of 10). Performers each draw a card in secret. We run the scene according to the relevant intensities of the characters’ objectives, where the game is to guess at the end the values of each performer’s card and to discuss any observations and discoveries from the exercise. The game can also work well in



combination with the silent scene exercise as an advanced rehearsal technique, on the rare occasion there is the luxury of time.

## **4 – Mapping and reflection**

### **4.1 – Opera as cultural cartography**

The human impulse to understand our time and place, our situation in the world through narrative informs both critical and aesthetic endeavours. This is where I think artistic practice and cultural theory make compatible bedfellows, in praxis, particularly in their cartographic processes. The contemporary realist approach self-consciously tailors methodologies best suited to apprehending the situation. These involve the skilful reading and interpretation of the ‘world’s sounds’, by which I mean its multiplicity of voices and values, with their on-going iterations, and mutations. I am minded to agree with Jameson’s view that contemporary narrative productions (of opera and other cultural forms) must now necessarily consider the larger world systems within which they generate their own worlds. Whether an opera production is consciously conceived as historically indeterminate, transposed to another place or particular period in history, ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’ it does so from the imaginative perspective of the present situation, which it also reflects. As a caveat to Jameson’s Marxist-informed perspective, I still favour putting the human being at the centre of how the present situation might be apprehended. Den Tandt’s idea of consensus is approachable if combined with a leap of faith about the existence of truth: a ‘reality bet’ based on self-conscious, reasoned propositions and agreed upon parameters, such as in the process whereby a director and designer might conceive of the imagined situation of an opera production, for a cast to then explore, develop and embody.

Opera productions are maps of how people co-construct worlds to tell stories; they reference a combination of actual and imagined characteristics in relation to a group’s understanding and experience of the wider world in which they live. This form of mapping relies on an acceptance of the conventions of the art form, contractual terms of reference, and imagined reality, making opera productions a form of cultural cartography. I propose that the performance of opera is about navigating these idiomatic maps, which I liken to the practice of orienteering, led at different phases in the process of creating an opera production by different people, such as the director, designers, conductor,

choreographer, chorus master, stage manager, and so forth. Whilst productions might be made by a particular group of people in a particular place and time, they are often toured and remade or ‘revived’ by other people, for other audiences and in other places and times. Thus, opera frequently tests the bounds of belief in its ‘experimentations with the real’ and through its potential to reflect the concerns of wider society.

## 4.2 – Mapping ideas from their material traces

In the development of ideas leading up to his work on the *Antinomies of Realism*, Fredric Jameson turns his critical focus from literary forms and philology to film and film theory.<sup>191</sup> Jameson cites *figuration* (which suggests the possibility of representing a seemingly un-representable reality through allegorical means) as the mode through which class struggle can be discerned in film. Figuration then becomes a component in the methodological toolkit for Den Tandt’s dialogical realism.

With regards to Jameson’s period of the postmodern (from the late 1960s), he identifies a ‘new’ and heightened sense of spatiality (indicated by but beyond the visible) and the need for new methods of mapping it. A strategy for representing the un-representable follows Adorno’s appropriation of Walter Benjamin’s seductively poetic concept of the *constellation*: ‘ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars’.<sup>192</sup> Jameson’s idea of the ‘postmodern’ is therefore something that can only be apprehended ‘through a process of constellating its affiliated concepts in such a way as to allow its features to become discernible in some artificial, but no less useful and meaningful configuration’.<sup>193</sup> I adopt Jamesonian ideas in my first case study, staging Handel’s opera *Ariodante*, employing the conceit of the map to interrogate the way operatic hermeneutics produce spaces. I examine how textual, visual, choreographic and musical features work dialogically, constellating into a metanarrative that is the production’s reading of the opera. I discuss how puppetry in the latter is used as a form of figuration, to express the

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<sup>191</sup> He famously claims that: ‘The visual is *essentially* pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination; thinking about its attributes becomes an adjunct to that, if it is unwilling to betray its object; while the most austere films necessarily draw their energy from the attempt to repress their own excess (rather than the more thankless effort to discipline the viewer).’ Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London: Routledge, 1990) p.6.

<sup>192</sup> Walter Benjamin’s famous proposal in the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’ to *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928), translated as *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1977).

<sup>193</sup> Tally, *The Project of Dialectical Criticism*, p.90.

hopes and fears of a community, and detail how actual and virtual elements constellate around musical form.

In his book on *Brecht and Method*, Jameson sees the formal qualities of Brecht's work as valuable to making sense of our own postmodern world system in a kind of late Marxism suited to the period of multinational capitalism. Brechtian devices of *Verfremdungseffekt* (estrangement effect) in performances – such as the use of captions, subtitles or surtitles, 'third-person' acting, quotations, and disjunctions in conventions, such as the breaking of the fourth wall to address an audience directly – are seen as a dramatic and representational method of Lukàcs's 'reification', relating directly to the fragmentations of social existence under late capitalism as a form of 'realism achieved by means of Cubism'.<sup>194</sup>

The concept of observing a subject from different points in space and time simultaneously, i.e., the act of moving around an object to seize it from several successive angles fused into a single image (multiple viewpoints, mobile perspective, simultaneity or multiplicity), is a generally recognized device used by the Cubists.<sup>195</sup> Of course, cubism and its methods of figuration were also of their time, albeit widely influential since. The self-consciousness of the cubist approach is what Jameson sees as relevant to the postmodern condition and to his concept of 'cognitive mapping', to which I turn my attention below. In the meantime, Cubist methods of figuration are features of both of my case study productions, *Ariodante* and *Written On Skin*, such as in the presentation of simultaneous action across multiple spaces within a single frame. In both case studies such narrative features are also examples of contemporary realist strategies that signal, and therefore invite an audience to become more aware of their own methods of storytelling. In addition, in my own creative practice, the discipline of directing revivals involves bringing production ideas back to life, often with new casts, from the material traces of their original incarnations. The key to this, in my experience, has been to apprehend and transmit the spirit of the production anew rather than slavishly attempt to reproduce its forms, which is an impossible task given changing casts and circumstances.

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>195</sup> Cottington, D., *Cubism and its Histories*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) p. 92.

### 4.3 – Cognitive mapping

This concept developed out of earlier cartographic practices that have attempted to chart the historical production of capital and space. It has informed my own thinking about how to position my work in opera within a theoretical discourse. Ernest Mandel's influential economic analysis in *Late Capitalism*<sup>196</sup> – that there have thus far been three modes of capital (market, monopoly and now multinational) – combines with Henri Lefebvre's conception of the historical production of space<sup>197</sup> in Jameson's assertion that:

three historical stages of capital have each generated a type of space unique to it, even though these three stages are obviously more profoundly interrelated than are the spaces of other modes of production. The three types of space I have in mind are all the result of discontinuous expansions or quantum leaps in the enlargement of capital, in the latter's penetration and colonization of hitherto uncommodified areas.<sup>198</sup>

The first space of market capitalism is likened to the logic of the grid with examples of the well-ordered city and the Enlightenment project of measuring, explaining, and ordering the world. Its dominant aesthetic is that of a 'demystifying' classic realism.

With the age of imperialism and the emergence of monopoly capital in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, new national and international spaces opened up. As a result, in this telling of the history of capital, the authentic consumer experience is separated from the truth of production of that experience and *figuration*, or allegory, becomes more prevalent as a way of apprehending it. Modernist aesthetic attempts to 'square the circle' of this new representational crisis result in what Jameson calls 'monadic relativism', by which he means 'closed' interior worlds of consciousness that stand figuratively for a now un-representable social totality.<sup>199</sup>

The 'quantum leap' from this colonial space of monopoly to that of late or multinational capitalism is less clearly definable, although there is the suggestion that it is a question of reach and degree, amplified by new technologies that have compressed both space and time. The aesthetic mode of the postmodern is, according to Jameson, the 'cultural logic of late capitalism'. The evolution of aesthetic modes in response to these

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<sup>196</sup> First published as *Der Spätkapitalismus* in 1972.

<sup>197</sup> Lefebvre, H., *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell 1991). First published in 1974.

<sup>198</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 410.

<sup>199</sup> Examples of this given are 'modernist' literary devices such as the stream of consciousness and montage, amongst others, emerging in the visual arts and music.

developments in the growth of capital exists, it would seem, as in the evolution of the natural world, alongside older aesthetic forms until they become antiquated, transformed or extinct, according to their situation.

Jameson intended his concept of ‘cognitive mapping’ to describe the work being done by postmodern artists and critics, whilst conceding that it is a kind of ‘modernist strategy’; ‘it retains an impossible concept of totality whose representational failure seemed for the moment as useful and productive as its (inconceivable) success’.<sup>200</sup> In *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (1992) Jameson evolved the notion of a ‘geopolitical unconscious’ under globalisation, looking towards developments now being made in the spatial humanities.

With regard to operatic works and their reception, there is a growing field of interest in opera’s migration to other spaces, such as film, advertising and the Internet. This feels symptomatic of a trend away from the voice as the focus of opera studies: on the one hand towards operatic objects and narratives grounded in the material; on the other hand, towards the evolution of opera’s idiomatic form in relation to film and in digital spheres, such as the online platform Opera Vision. In the light of concepts such as cognitive mapping and a geopolitical unconscious, in my own creative practice and second case study I experiment with how removing the material signifiers of set, costumes and the majority of props from the world premiere production of *Written On Skin* in 2012 affected a European tour of semi-staged concert performances (with most of the original cast) in 2016. In relation to spatial concerns, I detail how rehearsed ‘thought maps’ were generated and relied upon to embody, navigate and communicate the singers’ dramatic and musical performances. As this semi-staged version of the opera toured again to venues in Holland, Germany and China in 2018, I reflect on the integrity of such ‘thought maps’ in front of a new conductor, orchestra and cast members, and in correspondence with new platforms and international audiences.

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<sup>200</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 417-8.

#### 4.4 – Absent cause

Fredric Jameson's definition of history in *The Political Unconscious* as 'absent cause' has been a useful framing concept for me in mapping details and reflecting on events in my case study productions. History, Jameson writes:

is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in the textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious.<sup>201</sup>

I read 'the textual form' in this instance broadly to include language, musical notation, material artefacts and the 'social text' of behavioural practices. The idea that history leaves traces and maps in cultural artefacts, but is somehow the absent cause that informs how we live in the present, resonates with the performance practice of generating 'backstories', or imagining subtext and missing pertinent details that go towards constructing the world and characters in a play text, libretto and score, making them more psychologically 'real', congruent and apprehendable to those interpreting them. These often remain invisible to an audience but inform a performer's interpretation of a role and are intended to shore up the embankments of faith in the 'willingly suspended disbelief' of the world on stage.

In making this connection between disciplines of storytelling and history, I am reminded of the paratactic prose style of Ernest Hemingway, who famously committed to text just 'the visible tip of the iceberg' of the stories in his novels. The 'spaces in between' the narrated surface action – their punctuation as such – invite the reader's imaginative interpretation to participate in the story's telling. The telling of history, of course, invites an interpretation of events, and historiography follows. Whose version of events is privileged and why? Whose sense of truth? Whose realism?

#### 4.5 – Narrative as ontology

Finding a way to interpret our perception of the world, if we are going to have a hope of changing it, involves a level of discernment. Narratives, in their broader definition of 'telling stories', are also themselves forms of 'sense-making' of the world. Narratology,

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<sup>201</sup> Jameson, F., *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981) p. 35.

as the discipline of criticism concerned with issues of narrative, or ‘how to translate *knowing* into *telling*’,<sup>202</sup> has emerged primarily from literary criticism, such as Jameson’s:

The project of dialectical criticism, therefore, involves the patient, meticulous, and attentive *reading* [original emphasis] of the situation in which we find ourselves, broadly conceived; but in this analytic and interpretive activity also lie the revolutionary forces of current and future struggles.... Reading Jameson, reading Jameson reading others, and reading further on our own will not amount to a satisfactorily utopian political practice in its own right; but it may well allow us as critics to gain some new understanding of the world system, to apprehend our present situation in such a way as to discern the indistinct, but nevertheless real, signs of the radically different forms emerging at the edges or the seams of its shifting spaces.<sup>203</sup>

Importantly, it is our identities as readers, through our encounter with a text, which takes the practice of ‘reading’ into the world. With regards to musical ‘text’, Jean-Jacques Nattiez argues that ‘a narrative emerges... only when a temporal series of objects and events is taken over by a metalinguistic discourse’<sup>204</sup> and that such ‘narrative, strictly speaking is *not in the music*, but *in the plot imagined and constructed by the listeners* from functional objects... for the listener, any “narrative” instrumental work is not *in itself* a narrative, but the *structural analysis in music of an absent narrative*’.<sup>205</sup> Whilst there seems to be some similarity in how these two critics position readers and listeners in relation to cultural texts, the former attempts to ‘discern the indistinct, but nevertheless real’ signs of forces that shape formal structures in literature by bringing the identity of the reader and their situation into the encounter, whereas the latter dismisses formal properties of instrumental music as ‘functional objects’, with attempts to discern narrative meaning from them as ‘nothing but superfluous metaphor’.<sup>206</sup> To my mind (informed by dramatic logic as opposed to formal logic), both musical and literary encounters are always embodied to some extent (by their creators, readers, players and listeners). The extent of this embodiment might be said to rely on just how ‘superfluous’ metaphor is to a person’s sense of reality.

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<sup>202</sup> White, H., ‘The Value of Narrative in the Representation of Reality’, in W.J.T. Mitchell (ed.), *On Narrative*, (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1980) p. 1, italics in the original.

<sup>203</sup> Robert T. Tally Jr., *Fredric Jameson: The Project of Dialectical Criticism* (London: Pluto Press, 2014) p. 165.

<sup>204</sup> Nattiez, J-J, ‘Can One Speak of Narrativity in Music?’, in *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* (1990, 115) p. 243.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid. p. 249 (italics in the original).

<sup>206</sup> Ibid. p. 257.



#### 4.6 – Glass and mirrors

The mirror, and its sometimes-synonymous material relation the glass, has been much written about with respect to the function of art's relationship to life and nature, beyond the context of Hamlet's advice to a company of travelling players. There are two instances that I wish to discuss here. The first relates to glass as a material and its properties as a vessel, from the point of view of the performer, in this case an opera singer's attempt to articulate their experience and discipline in service of their art form. The second concerns the mirror and the contemplation of the mind's influence on one's experience of reality, written over 760 years ago during the turmoil of feudal Japan.

At an event at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden in June 2016 entitled *Insights: In Conversation with Janet Baker and Joyce DiDonato*, Janet Baker was asked to explain her image of a singer as a two-way sheet of glass. In their words:

**JB:** The magic is made possible when you've put in the work and prepared the way for it... An artist who sings is like a sheet of glass. A glass is not a mirror, you've got to keep the glass clean so you can see out and others can look in and see... Performing is about serving something more important than yourself: communicating the music.

**JDD:** The work of keeping the two-way vision of the glass clean is endless... <sup>207</sup>

The two singers go on to suggest that the performer should be like a (glass) vessel. If you have put in the work, prepared the way for it and are lucky, 'something else' is able to pass through you – an experience of 'connection', 'openness', 'aliveness' and 'transformation' are words they use – and perhaps it is this that audiences are also sometimes moved to feel. The affective power of music to trigger emotional responses can be profound, whether we are conscious of contexts or not. With regards to realism and my experience of working with singers, it is often where the performer's personal narratives (and feelings) intersect with the music, and metanarrative of a staged musical production, that 'something else' happens and 'clicks'. This is exciting for everyone when it occurs in a rehearsal room and may then become perceptible to an audience in

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<sup>207</sup> This event in 2017 at ROH was filmed and is available to view on YouTube at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d70Bj3tC0XQ>

Joyce DiDonato first interviewed Dame Janet Baker in 2013, the year of her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, at Wigmore Hall in London in which the two singers discussed their personal preparations for acting, singing, 'mind-set', and 'chemistry' of working with others, agreeing that the 'magic happens' in participating in 'the spur of the moment' and in the freedom of 'being' not 'acting' a role in a production. Towards the end of the interview they first discuss Janet Baker's metaphor of the performer as a sheet of glass. The interview is also available on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6Rg0yGFt1o>, (accessed 8/3/2017)

performance, who in turn may be affected by strong connections with their own personal narrative.

A number of musicians I have interviewed have spoken about the preciousness and rarity of this kind of phenomenon, in language that borders on the religious, whilst not personally abiding to any particular formal religion. Indeed, many cite this kind of experience as a reason for their involvement and careers in music making, particularly at the highest levels of the profession. Whether this relates or not to a moment of ‘self-actualisation’ or an awakening, with an acknowledgement from audiences and colleagues, it seems to provide fuel for the spiritual wellbeing of performers, those who work on the musical preparation of opera performances, and indeed audiences.<sup>208</sup>

This is significant for me as a director interested in why people do what they do and say, or do not say what they think. As previously stated, I practise the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin.<sup>209</sup> In a letter that has become known as ‘On Attaining Buddhahood’, written in 1255 to one of his followers at a time of immense social and religious turmoil as well as natural disasters befalling Japan, Nichiren states:

There are not two lands, pure or impure in themselves. The difference lies solely in the good or evil of our minds. It is the same with a Buddha and an ordinary being. When deluded, one is called an ordinary being, but when enlightened, one is called a Buddha. This is similar to a tarnished mirror that will shine like a jewel when polished. A mind now clouded by the illusions of the innate darkness of life is like a tarnished mirror, but when polished, it is sure to become like a clear mirror, reflecting the essential nature of phenomena and the true aspect of reality. Arouse deep faith, and diligently polish your mirror day and night. How should you polish it? Only by chanting nam myoho renge kyo.<sup>210</sup>

The clarity, or purity of our minds (which in Buddhism means the whole person, not just one’s thoughts) determines how we apprehend and experience reality in this analogy. Meditative practices, such as chanting a particular phrase or *mantra*, advocate the circularity of a hermeneutic non-linear paradigm, of putting one’s life ‘in rhythm’ with a sound and its meaning, transforming and letting go of attachments and aversions in order

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<sup>208</sup> For further documented evidence of this in relation to audiences, see AHRC’s research project report into the ‘cultural value of the arts’ published in 2016: <https://ahrc.ukri.org/documents/publications/cultural-value-project-final-report/>

<sup>209</sup> I have practised a form of Buddhism for over twenty-five years based on the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin - a controversial, thirteenth-century Japanese scholar - who formulated a daily practice for ordinary people living in society based on Shakyamuni’s Lotus Sutra. I encountered and continue my practice of socially engaged Buddhism with the lay organization Soka Gakkai International. Website: <http://www.sgi.org>

<sup>210</sup> Nichiren Daishonin, *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Vol. 1 (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 1999) p. 4.

to live more wisely, compassionately and more fruitfully. In this instance, *myoho rengo kyo* is the name of the ‘mystic law’ of life itself, or ‘middle way’, that encompasses dialectical concepts within Buddhism such as the ‘oneness of mind and body’, the ‘oneness of self and environment’, and the ‘oneness of good and evil’.<sup>211</sup>

To my mind, Jameson’s dialectical project at times sounds very close to Buddhism:

The dialectic is an injunction to think the negative and the positive together at one and the same time, in the unity of a single thought, where moralising wants to have the luxury of condemning this evil without particularly imagining anything else in its place.<sup>212</sup>

There seems to be some resonance between dialectical criticism, artistic discipline or craft and Buddhist practice. The common ground is the self-discipline of situating oneself in the present, exercising critical abilities and refining one’s perceptual faculties in pursuit of ‘making connections’. Jameson’s formulation of noumenal concepts, like the political unconscious and the practice of ‘cognitive mapping’, are to the critic what the practice of ‘keeping one’s glass clean’ is to the singer to be a clear vessel for the communication of the music, or polishing the mirror of the mind is to one who seeks to awaken to the essential reality of the present.

I shall briefly give some context to how Buddhism informs my perception and conception of reality. The Sanskrit word ‘Buddha’ means ‘someone who is awakened’ to the truth. My Buddhist practice, to continue Nichiren’s analogy, is like polishing the mirror of my mind in order to see myself in the world more clearly; it works holistically by awakening my inherent ‘Buddha nature’, or ‘greater self’, and elevating my ‘life-condition’. This means becoming mindful: more awake to the significance and value of my daily life and ‘the world’s sounds’ as I encounter and resonate with them. The physiological benefits of chanting mantras are generally known to include: stimulation of the brain’s frontal lobe, positive effects on well-being through a concentration on the breath and the physical vibrations created by the voice. Moreover, chanting to manifest

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<sup>211</sup> In brief, ‘myoho’ means everything: life and death, manifest and latent. ‘Renge’ is the Lotus that symbolises the simultaneity of cause and effect and ‘kyo’ is vibration, sound or thread that speaks of the interconnectedness of all phenomena. Together they form the title of the 26 chapters of the Lotus Sutra and contain the entirety of its meaning within their characters. *Myoho rengo kyo* is known as the Mystic Law or Middle Way; the teaching of chanting *Nam myoho rengo kyo* is to put oneself in rhythm with this universal law of life.

<sup>212</sup> Jameson, F., *Valences of the Dialectic*, (London: Verso, 2009) p. 421.

Buddhahood in myself, and to perceive it in others, naturally broadens my perspective on daily life and instils in me a sense of calm and focus whilst, I believe, enabling me to respond more in the moment throughout the day. It is a daily practice that requires self-discipline and assiduous effort, to avoid becoming purely habitual and, I would claim, takes genuine courage.<sup>213</sup>

In general, my morning Buddhist practice energises and prepares me for the day, whereas chanting in the evenings allows me to filter, process and reflect on events, thoughts and feelings I have experienced or am experiencing, while I focus my gaze on the Gohonzon.<sup>214</sup> The latter is a mandala, or graphic representation of the gathering of beings described in the Lotus Sutra that assemble to hear the Buddha's teaching, known as 'the ceremony in the air', embodying various functions and forces in the universe, with *Nam myoho renge kyo* inscribed down the centre. The mandala is completed as a kind of cosmic map in three dimensions when a living person chants *Nam myoho renge kyo* to it with a seeking mind: 'participating in the enlightened reality that it depicts.'<sup>215</sup>

I see some similarity in the relationship I have when I chant to the Gohonzon to the way a musician interprets and embodies musical notation, or an actor 'actions' a textual map of a scene, or a dancer embodies choreography; they are all practices of navigation. How we make use of various maps and mirrors, therefore, may be said to be about situating ourselves in the present, refining our perceptual faculties and exercising critical abilities in pursuit of making connections and self-expression. I would argue that navigating the world with such tools requires an element of faith in both one's ability to use them and in their effectiveness. This faith can lead to the discovery of 'personal truth', create pathways to 'dialogical truth' and generate more good faith.

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<sup>213</sup> Ikeda writes: 'Courage is not just acting bravely. Buddhist courage embodies wisdom for 'perceiving the true aspect of reality' and triumphing over adversity... We can overcome our inner weakness with the lion's roar of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, and take action to surmount our self-imposed limitations that make us give up or settle for less.' in 'Courage – your determination to win in this moment can change everything', in *Art of Living* (Taplow: SGI-UK, January 2019) pp. 18-21.

<sup>214</sup> Nichiren inscribed Gohonzon (object of devotion for observing the mind of Buddha) as a tool for others to reveal their Buddha nature from the 1270s. Daisaku Ikeda refers to Nichiren's Gohonzon as a mirror that reflects one's inner life in: R.H. Seager, *Encountering the Dharma: Daisaku Ikeda, Soka Gakkai, and the globalization of Buddhist humanism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) p.158.

<sup>215</sup> Stone, J., 'Chanting the August Title of the Lotus Sutra: Daimoku Practices in Classical and Medieval Japan' in R.K.Payne (ed.) *Re-Visioning Kamakura Buddhism* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1988) p. 153.

#### 4.7 – My own praxis

Over the course of my four-year research project, I have sought to integrate my reading of theory into my thinking about my directorial practice, particularly through the written analysis of my case study productions. This, in turn, has clarified in my own mind which aspects of a production's metanarrative might be made clearer when it comes to directing revivals. For example, whilst I was very familiar with Brechtian ideas from my creative practice, Fredric Jameson's contextualisation of Brecht's methods, through his analysis of form and concepts of cognitive mapping and the postmodern, have enabled me to gain another perspective on my own experience of Brecht, which I have found genuinely thought provoking and useful. In particular, concepts developed as tools to map ideas from their material traces have had practical application in my work as a director, as I shall demonstrate in my case studies.

Admittedly, the academic language of theory (especially Den Tandt's) has been a barrier to implementing ideas in a practical way and remains so for many of my opera colleagues. I have therefore expended effort and time in attempting to translate these ideas, as I have understood them, from theory to practice. This has not always been successful, of course, and whilst professional colleagues are curious about the subject of realism, hearing about the abstracted theory side of it either seems to leave them intrigued to know more, or rather perplexed and cold. Within the academic environment, my creative practice and professional experience has been the thing that has piqued most people's interest. I have personally found the attempt to build bridges between these two communities stimulating and rewarding; the experience has tested my own assumptions, consolidated my thinking and given me a foundation from which to build future collaborations. For example, the process of reviving the production of *Ariodante* several times during my period of research has given me the opportunity to revisit and refine my application of theory to my own working methodology and to generate my own theoretical propositions. In addition, I have found the encounter with Den Tandt's formulation of realism on virtual grounds to be a creative catalyst to exploring the potential of dialogue and dialogical methods of generating knowledge. This has led me to new creative experimentation with a focus on representing unseen forces or 'truths', which become manifest through embodiment and in performance. I develop this interest

in my second case study chapter on *Written On Skin*, as a conscious experiment in Jameson's cognitive mapping and post-modern performance.

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## **5 – Dialogue and dialogic practice**

### **5.1 – My own reflexive position**

I first encountered the dialogic ‘turn’ in cultural theory developed from Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination* in the 1990s during my undergraduate studies in English and related literature at York University, and as an Erasmus student at Université Jean Monnet in Saint-Étienne. At this time, I also encountered the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism and the Soka Gakkai International. My interest deepened through participation in the SGI-UK discussion meeting movement and a daily Buddhist practice alongside my mentor in faith and recognised champion of dialogue, Daisaku Ikeda.<sup>216</sup> In 1994, I moved to London and taught English as a Foreign Language for academic purposes to classes of mixed nationalities and abilities. Alongside this period of just over six years as a teacher, I developed my interest in theatre and the performing arts, exploring interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary environments during a two-year MA full-time programme in Theatre Directing. During my master’s degree at Goldsmiths’ University, I devised new work with actors, dancers, visual artists and musicians, spending 3 months researching carnival in Brazil. An interest in mixed media, multi-cultural and multi-modal creative environments led me into working in opera, reuniting me with a childhood interest in Western Art music and playing the piano.

I moved from London to Cardiff in 2001 to work on contract at Welsh National Opera as a staff director. I also worked on a number of freelance projects from 2005, eventually leaving WNO to pursue an international directing career in 2012. Significantly, I experienced the breakdown of a creative working relationship in 2014 that led to a mid-life, mid-career reassessment and application to study for a PhD. In 2015 Cardiff University granted me their first doctoral scholarship under the research Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Opera and Drama, within the School of Music. Encountering Den Tandt’s experimental work on dialogical realism in the course of this study in 2016, my own interest in dialogue as a research methodology was given a more structured approach following two workshop days on ‘Understanding Dialogue – From

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<sup>216</sup> See: <http://www.daisakuikeda.org> last accessed 9/3/2018.

Theory to Practice’ in 2017 and 2018.<sup>217</sup> I have subsequently continued as member of a dialogue group that meets several times a year to practise dialogue techniques at the Centre for Applied Buddhism at Taplow Court, just outside London.

The promise of dialogue, or ‘thinking together’ has been defined as a ‘quest for artistry in human communications’ and a way for a group of people to discover new areas of (self-) awareness and creativity by challenging assumptions, suspending judgement and experiencing new perspectives.<sup>218</sup> I see this same quest embarked upon in the production of opera performances. In applying Den Tandt’s theory of a dialogical realism to the contemporary staging of opera in my first case study on *Ariodante*, my interest was ignited in the potential of dialogue as a research methodology and means of understanding opera in its broader social contexts. Why, for instance, do people work in opera? Two prominent themes around motivations emerge from this question in the reasons colleagues give for pursuing careers in opera: the value generated in creative human interactions and an exploration of ideas from different perspectives, both also defining features of dialogue. It has, therefore, seemed fitting that alongside an interrogation of my own creative practice of directing and reviving opera productions, my research methods have involved conversations and interviews with colleagues across all disciplines and roles in opera. In a sense, these have been an extension of what my opera colleagues already consider to be a dialogic space. I have deliberately chosen not to widen the scope of this aspect of my study to audiences in order to contain the level of data generated within practical parameters, keeping the focus of my research on opera professionals, although many of these are also audience members.

Working in opera today is tricky terrain. It involves the participation, negotiation and cooperation of many people, often many nationalities, to realise a production. Each company, cast and production team forms a kind of family, or society in miniature, where roles are contractually defined, and whose aim is the co-creation and communication of opera as an art form, in the midst of many other, often competing narratives around working methods, performance style, repertoire, celebrity, career ambition, power or money, for example. Each individual has their own relationship with the material of

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<sup>217</sup> Facilitated by Professor Simon Keyes, from Winchester Centre of Religion, Reconciliation and Peace at the University of Winchester, organised by the Centre for Applied Buddhism at Taplow Court in Berkshire.

<sup>218</sup> Isaacs, W., *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*. (New York: Random House, 1999).



opera but must work with others, who have theirs, towards achieving projects, productions and performances, and hopefully some consensus in delivering them. These individual iterations exist within the slightly larger ‘bubble’ of the wider opera-producing community, which for many takes on the characteristics of an extended international family.

Prior to my research, I had been rehearsing and touring opera productions consecutively, without many breaks, for about 15 years and, mindful of my own bias, I had reached a point of wanting to reassess my role with collaborators and reinvigorate my own practice. These mid-career desires were compounded for me by a climate of increasing administration and neoliberal trends in how the arts in general were and still are evaluated and funded, exacerbated under economic austerity. I believed that narratives that were publicly justifying and assessing the cultural value of the arts through economic, or rather economistic arguments<sup>219</sup> and capitalist discourse, to be driving the art form towards further crisis; continuing to defend opera as an art form by framing it as a business or, even worse, an industry (creative or otherwise), seemed to me to be untenable, let alone a symptom of something more pervasive and politically motivated. I wanted to reconnect with, and perhaps better understand, what I loved about opera; therefore, my investigation into how opera can create value on a personal and societal level has become something of an expression of resistance to the hegemony of neoliberalism, and what I see and experience as its colonisation of the arts, particularly in the regional companies in the UK. During the course of my own ten-year residency with a national company (WNO), I witnessed an alarming and seemingly disproportionate increase in the number of ‘upstairs’ administrative roles whilst numbers in the core ‘performing’ company such as resident chorus and orchestral ensembles diminished. Resident directing roles also dwindled,<sup>220</sup> as did the number of new productions, number of performances and touring venues served across the South West of England and Wales.

From the beginning of my study, as one of my research methodologies, I have conducted semi-structured interviews and conversations with opera colleagues, in which I

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<sup>219</sup> For a contemporary discussion of Karl Polanyi’s concept of the ‘economistic fallacy’, developed in the 1950s, see: Block, F., *The power of market fundamentalism: Karl Polanyi's critique*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>220</sup> There were four staff directors on contract when I joined WNO in 2001 with just one left by 2012, supplemented with less experienced (and of course cheaper) freelance assistants or interns.

have asked them *why* they work in opera (which often elicited their personal histories), and more specifically why they *continue* to work in opera (prompting more conceptualised responses). The third question I have always asked interviewees/my conversation partners was what they understood by the term ‘realism’, which has often opened up into a dialogue about if and how it was relevant to them and our work together.

I have been mindful of my own ethical responsibilities towards my colleagues and reflexive position as a researcher and, therefore, have actively kept ethical concerns at the forefront of my consciousness as the director, or revival director, of a particular project in which my conversation partners have participated.<sup>221</sup> Whilst I have occupied a privileged role of authority over the scheduling of time and people in rehearsals, with artistic influence within a given project, I have not generally been in a position of control over the purse strings or in casting, and have viewed myself as an artistic facilitator as much as a collaborative shaper of the collective work. I have often been on privileged terms of friendship, or as a professional colleague with those that I have interviewed within the opera community. Following the first three structured questions, I have employed the Socratic laddering technique (asking ‘why’ a lot) in order to get to the core values and motivations of the other, or others, and what is really important to them. I have listened to their personal stories, and from then on have also been practising dialogue. I have done this because I wanted to explore the hypothesis that our (shared) values shape our experience of reality and therefore our conception of realism, or what we might accept as plausible to us in pursuit of ‘imaginative truth’.

Dialogue, as a research methodology and also a social intervention, is a form of discussion aimed at answering a question or the resolution of a problem, with proposals for action to be taken. Before debating the respective merits of different views and values, dialogue requires the acknowledgement that different perspectives exist. In principle, when trust has been established, the hope is to experience cultural differences as the fresh discovery of other ways of looking at the world, enhancing a sense of mutual respect, rather than such differences becoming the cause of misunderstanding and

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<sup>221</sup> Following Ruth Finnegan, ‘Ethics’ in *Oral Tradition and The Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practice*. (London: Routledge, 1992) pp. 214-233.

conflict.<sup>222</sup> Voicing what we value, in my experience, can have an effect of encouraging us to treasure and appreciate it more; I have witnessed the positive effects of doing this in working relationships. Transcribing many of the recorded conversations has also influenced my own connection to both the people and values embedded in their responses. My intention has been to engage my colleagues to speak from the heart, reaching out in an effort to understand each other and thus enhance our common humanity, not to obtain some advantage.

Having known many of my interviewees professionally over an extended period of time, and established relationships based on trust, professional respect and friendship afforded me privileged access and an intimate position as an interviewer and dialogue partner. With this came an ethical responsibility around confidentiality, especially as many participants were and still are high profile figures in the public eye, and the opera world is very close-knit. From an ethical standpoint, the role of director, of course, also comes with a certain amount of power privilege and I was very careful about the timing and sensitivity of when to conduct dialogues with colleagues. Throughout this study I have been conscious of the potential power-issues, responsibilities and abuse of my position as a director; mindful of my directorial voice of authority to request interviews for research purposes, I thus proposed them as opportunities for dialogues as part of my PhD research project, stating so explicitly and that any participation was completely voluntary, separate from contractual commitments to the productions we were working on, with the option for confidentiality and/or anonymity in any findings I might share or publish.

An overwhelming uptake and the readiness of many of my colleagues to participate heartened me. I recorded 34 such interview/dialogue sessions ranging from 25 to over 90 minutes in length, over 5 different productions spanning a two and half year period, as well as having additional informal conversations with many other colleagues.<sup>223</sup> I interpret this partly as evidence of the strength of trust I have with colleagues in my working relationships, that they wanted to help me, and that my research was seen to

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<sup>222</sup> See Daisaku Ikeda, *One by One: The World is Yours to Change* (Sonoma, California: Dunhill, 2005).

<sup>223</sup> Participants were drawn from productions and presenting companies from 2016-19 that included: *Ariodante* at Dutch National Opera, Canadian Opera Company and Lyric Opera of Chicago, *Written On Skin* international concert tour for MCO, the Holland and Beijing Music Festivals, *Gianni Schicchi* for ROH, *Tosca* and *Khovanshchina* for WNO.

offer a welcome opportunity for colleagues to talk and to be listened to. At particularly difficult junctures in a rehearsal period, scheduled dialogues proved to be both therapeutic and creatively rewarding for participants (myself included). This experience acknowledges the intrinsic value of dialogue and dialogical processes related to music making; it is both good and valuable to gift respect by creating a space of attention: to voice, to be listened to, to listen to others together, and to listen to oneself.

At times, I had to reflect on which ‘hat’ I was wearing and which voice I was using and hearing in conversations: researcher or director. There is inevitably a lot of overlap, as the roles require many of the same skills, processes and activities. I also refer to participants as dialogue partners or interviewees, mainly to make a distinction in my own mind, where the conversation has been weighted fairly evenly in the former, or the participant has done most of the talking in the latter. Occasionally, participants have brought content emerging from our conversations into rehearsal, which has been creatively productive, but I have always been mindful not to initiate this crossover without a dialogue partner’s or interviewee’s express permission to do so.

Remarkably, I have not experienced any negative effects, either in the behaviour of participants, on my own directing or the artistic quality of the work. On the contrary, I would assert the experience and feedback have been very positive, and the process has contributed to the level and clarity of commitment from participants to our collective artistic work. Of course, this reflection is from my perspective, usually as the director, and how I have experienced our working relationships. Any wariness or suspicion of me as a researcher, to being scrutinised, analysed or on the receiving end of a potentially critical voice of authority was not expressed by participants, but I acknowledge may have been present in those who did not volunteer to engage in the process.

One clear bias of my research findings, therefore, is that it is very much from the perspective of interested practitioners, about practitioners’ experiences and opinions. This is, however, perhaps its most important contribution to those working in or writing about opera. I have embarked on dialogues with community ‘insiders’ as a relatively contained, yet global community or research cell. Positioning myself as a practitioner-researcher at once ‘inside’ with a foot ‘outside’ the art form, I balance dialogue as a research methodology with a combination of methods in the analysis of form and media reception

of my case study productions. This multi-method approach to epistemic research is itself a feature of dialogical thinking and the overarching theme of my project – performing realism – as it relates to opera. My hope is to offer a holistic argument and partnership approach to credible research, by bridging disciplines.

Practising the principles of dialogue myself in my exchanges with colleagues (even when they have not necessarily agreed to enter into dialogue and the conversation has kept more to an interview format) has made me more curious about the people with whom I work, why they hold the values that they hold and how I sustain my own attention to them, or not. My interviews and dialogues with colleagues, therefore, have been both a research tool and a reflexive element of my practice as a director.

## **5.2 – Daisaku Ikeda and the creation of value**

Daisaku Ikeda is my Buddhist mentor and president of the Soka Gakkai International (SGI), or ‘value-creating society’. He is the third in a lineage of Japanese Buddhist mentor-disciples, now leading the global lay movement of Nichiren Buddhism. One of Ikeda’s key ideas on dialogue is the concept of ‘value-creation’ (soka) that originates in his predecessor’s Josei Toda and Tsunesaburo Makiguchi’s interpretation of the Lotus Sutra. The SGI philosophical perspective has been encapsulated in the concept of ‘Buddhist Humanism’, which is characterised by faith in the inherent dignity of every person without discrimination, and by a profound confidence in people’s capacity for positive transformation. Buddhist Humanism rests on the view that it is people themselves who possess wisdom about the human condition, rather than a higher power, and are thus able to create value in society. Whilst this view regards the person as the pivotal force of change within the interdependent network of phenomena that comprises life, it also promotes consciousness of, and respect for, the interdependence and interrelatedness of all life. It thus does not separate human beings from one another, from the environment, or from other forms of life. Rather, Buddhist Humanism emphasises the importance of promoting happiness and ‘the peace of the land’ through a harmonisation of these interdependent relationships.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Following the establishment of his teaching of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo in 1253, Nichiren Daishonin’s first major treatise and contribution to Buddhist thought and practice is known as ‘On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land’ (*Risshu Ankoku* in Japanese), written and submitted to the

Olivier Urbain identifies the role of dialogue in Ikeda's peacebuilding practice as a struggle to positively transform his own life as well as that of others.<sup>225</sup> Urbain extrapolates six strategies from Ikeda's approach to dialogue.<sup>226</sup> I find these resonate with my own creative practice and aspirations for opera's dialogical potential, whilst conceding they require 'a bit of a cultural shift' in working practices in many opera companies. They are firstly, preparation by studying the life and work of the dialogue partners. In the operatic context, this extends to the dialogue any creative artist might have with the material and people with whom they are working. The discipline of preparation, in my own creative practice and that of many of my opera colleagues, is an on-going process of exercising respect towards the material, others, and myself in advance of 'performance', or interaction with the attention of collaborators. The gift of respect by investing time, interest and one's full attention to dialogue partners is, therefore, a fundamental requirement of 'doing dialogue' in any environment, and the second of Ikeda's dialogical strategies. In the operatic context, creating space for dialogue broadens the field beyond the sanctity of the score and the dominant voices of directors and conductors to all those assembled in the encounter, and asks us to value everyone's contribution to the process, which may challenge egos and rehearsal cultures.

Within the context of making opera productions, where there are so many 'voices' contributing to the overall environment and output, the discipline of achieving focus, and directing where attention should be given is critical to successful rehearsal and performance environments. This relates to mutually agreed upon contractual matters of engagement in a dialogical process<sup>227</sup> and to the notion of an environment within which individual awareness and collective attention can be facilitated, focussed and

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ruling authorities at a time great turmoil in Japan in 1260. Available in English online at:

<https://www.nichirenlibrary.org/en/wnd-1/Content/2>

<sup>225</sup> Urbain, O., 'Bringing out the best in oneself and others: the role of dialogue in Daisaku Ikeda's peacebuilding practice.' In Stearns, P.N. (ed.), *Peacebuilding Through Dialogue: Education, Human Transformation, and Conflict Resolution*, (Fairfax, Virginia: George Mason University Press, 2018) p. 185-121.

<sup>226</sup> Urbain, O., *Daisaku Ikeda's Philosophy of Peace: Dialogue, Transformation and Citizenship*. (London & New York: I.B. Taurus, 2010). Urbain summarises Jürgen Habermas's attempts to save the enlightenment project of building a peaceful world based on human reason, using his concept of communicative rationality and theory of communicative action, as resonating with Ikeda's approach to dialogue and the creation of value. See p. 119-124.

<sup>227</sup> Both Den Tandt and Isaacs, among others, go into some detail about implicit and explicit contractual rules that need to be agreed upon and revisited in the course of successful dialogical exchanges.

‘contained’.<sup>228</sup> In opera there are clearly defined roles with contractual boundaries that can both contain and, where there is a culture of inclusivity and participation, encourage valuable contributions from particular perspectives at certain times in the process of creating productions. In my experience, the director’s role is often the one that needs to facilitate such dialogical spaces inside the rehearsal room, but frequently other roles, such as a sociable cast member, production, stage or company manager will facilitate other dialogical spaces and exchanges.

Urbain points to the relevant critical distinction, however, that Habermas makes between ‘purposive rationality’ and ‘communicative rationality’ in how those that embody roles in any social group engage with one another. Urbain summarises the negative evaluations of ‘purposive rationality’ thus:

Dialogue based on emotions (Romanticism) or on scepticism (post-modernism) is doomed to fail. Dialogue using purposive/instrumental rationality will lead to dehumanization (Weber) or manipulation (Adorno).<sup>229</sup>

How might this distinction relate to my work in opera? Purposive rationality frequently manifests in the assertions and objections of administrators who are disconnected from rehearsal processes, the officious communication of technical or health and safety regulations, as well as wilful performers, conductors and directors in particular. On the other hand, communicative rationality and ‘communicative action’ would equate with a shared commitment to a co-created sense of imaginative truth, which is also possible in the context of opera from those in all of the above roles and wonderful to participate in, when the circumstances are right. The contingent factors are often time and resources, as well as the openness of colleagues to genuine collaboration, particularly those in key roles. There is a job to be done and the production schedule often dictates, or at least piles on the pressure, to plough through more discursive working practices in order to set boundaries on creative resources and fix production blocking too early.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Isaacs, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*, p. 29-31.

<sup>229</sup> Urbain, p.119

<sup>230</sup> I might also mention musical concerns at this juncture because it is often the case that a conductor will have a music call with the cast at the beginning of rehearsals at which tempi are discussed and set, particularly if the conductor is grand, busy and then absent from most of the production rehearsals, returning at the end of the process for when the orchestra arrives. Often, tempi that are set at the beginning of studio rehearsals (informing how blocking is constructed) then inevitably change when the conductor returns, which can cause all kinds of dislocations for the cast and production (particularly choreographic

Thirdly in Ikeda's strategies for dialogue, intimacy is created through asking personal questions. Cultivating curiosity and the appropriacy of questions that probe for personal information and how this is 'used' is, in my experience, a delicate art in itself for a director, or facilitator of dialogue. There are always issues around sensitivity, trust and power in the disclosure of personal experiences, particularly in director-performer relationships. In my own approach, I try to incorporate another generally acknowledged principle of dialogue: to be as honest and open as possible myself, mindful of what value (or anti-value) that can create. Performers in particular will draw on their own life experience when imagining themselves in their roles, which they may consciously or unconsciously disclose in the course of rehearsals. I have witnessed and experienced abuses of privileged personal information by other directors in my career as an assistant and associate director, and there are certainly methods of working with performers and creative partners that advocate 'using' personal information and intimacy to manipulate people, if it serves a particular artistic vision or personal ambition; however, I have found them to be uncomfortable at best and ultimately damaging to genuine intimacy and respect.

Creative partnerships and trust, in my experience, eventually dissolve once a perceived dynamic of manipulation takes hold. I believe this also leads to an evacuation of truth and quality from the artistic product, although I am aware that many practitioners might disagree. Ethically, a level of respect and responsibility towards personal relationships, as well as sensitivity around disclosing personal information are important in establishing intimacy and trust. Opera often deals in the extremes of human circumstances and emotions, and the psychological phenomenon of 'parallel process' frequently applies in the phenomenon of 'life imitates art', as well as in naturalism's aim of 'art imitates life'. In my experience, groups of people all focussing on particular themes and dynamics within a particular operatic work during rehearsals often end up reflecting on or experiencing degrees of those same themes in their own lives. They necessarily get close to the material. A clear sense of personal responsibility and discipline towards sharing intimate feelings needs an accompanying 'safe space' in

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elements) if there is any intransigence, or act positively to galvanise the whole group if the right atmosphere of flexibility has been created.



rehearsal or creative context in which to share, explore and suspend judgement. Boundaries are important, as is knowing when to cross borders. The relationship of a performer's own experience to their imagined *dramatis persona* may need to be redrawn a number of times, for distinct and healthy boundaries to exist.

Ikeda asserts the aim of dialogue is to gain a shared insight into each other's point of view and intent, in order to create something new and of positive value. Developing trust through a level of personal disclosure and intimacy, with all colleagues, not only with performers in an operatic context, can form a very powerful sense of shared connection imaginatively and artistically. This, I would suggest, serves to strengthen the chances of Den Tandt's 'reality bet'. I personally value the importance of meeting with casts socially, even under the limited time frames of opera schedules, although I am aware of directors and conductors who deliberately limit this time as part of their approach to maintaining the integrity of their roles. 'Bonding-time', as a particular administrator I worked with used to call it, is increasingly devalued by moves to industrialise the art form, and yet, I would maintain it is largely because of the personal investment of so many outside the limelight that opera, as a collaborative art form, can function at all. Company management, for example, is much more than an administrative function; it plays a key role in creating value. From my own experience as both a resident and guest director in opera companies, the value of the personal welcome, care and respect shown to both resident and guest artists impacts enormously on the individual and group experience of the creative work. It does not need to take or cost much and the resulting goodwill and boost to morale can go a very long way.

Fourthly, Urbain identifies that in Ikeda's published dialogues with prominent world figures, the subject matter of exchanges moves towards more abstract and general topics. In this sense, the dynamic of the exchange shifts from the personal to shared material, and from the experiential context to conceptual formulations. On reflection, I see a corresponding dynamic within the context of opera, contributing to an individual's commitment to 'imaginative truth'. The process of sharing personal narratives around a subject (in this case the opera) and making genuine personal connections is always a delicate one but opens up the possibility of suspending judgement and disbelief between participants. Hearing different perspectives from within a group can also encourage

plausibility in a particular approach to staging an opera, when judgement is suspended. A director and designer's concept talk to a cast and company at the beginning of the rehearsal process and their method of working can set the temperature and tone for this work, as a group embarks on investigating and constructing the imaginative truth of a production.

The fifth strategy of Ikeda's practice of dialogue is to highlight principles of Buddhist Humanism that emerge in a dialogue partner's own words, drawing attention to similarities in his participants' conceptual thinking. Sixth is to investigate disagreement to find common ground. These principles remind me of Den Tandt's formulation of realist dialogical practice as 'negotiated disclosures' that emerge as a result of what he calls 'truth-oriented' investigations.<sup>231</sup> In the context of the wider world and broader aim of dialogue in society, Ikeda writes:

It is one's admirable personal traits and character that open others' hearts and change their thinking. Those qualities do not derive from one's social status or position; rather, they are a manifestation of how one lives one's life. The example of people who, whatever their circumstances or background, lead strong, positive and confident lives dedicated to the happiness of others and the welfare of society, cannot help but move and inspire those around them [...]

When we reach out in Buddhist dialogue in accord with the compassionate vow of the Buddha, we polish our lives and grow, too [...] The more we engage in dialogue with people – all of whom possess different states of life – the more we expand our own state of life and strengthen our compassionate spirit.<sup>232</sup>

For the kind of dialogue Ikeda is talking about to take place, the participants must challenge themselves to 'reach out' and 'elevate' shared concerns, as well as model the kind of attitude and behaviour they wish to see in others, by demonstrating it themselves. This is particularly important for the role of a facilitator of dialogic exchanges among groups of people.

The notion of a shared 'vow', as a deeply held determination and compass to action in life, is mirrored in the commitment to a shared 'imaginative truth' in the theatre. On the individual level, this definition of a vow resonates with Stanislavski's idea of the super-objective that steers a course for all of an actor's actions as a character.<sup>233</sup> Yet, events (in life and drama) are often the sites of competing desires that may knock one off

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<sup>231</sup> Den Tandt, C., 'Negotiated Disclosures: the Core Strategies of Dialogical Realism' in *On Virtual Grounds*, (Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2015) p. 174-211.

<sup>232</sup> Ikeda, D., 'Dialogue – forging human ties based on a spirit of great compassion', *Art of Living*, Taplow: SGI-UK (February 2018), pp.10-18

<sup>233</sup> Stanislavski, C., *An Actor Prepares*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1967) p. 252-3.

such a course. Motivations for actions can also be complex, at one moment in line with a super-objective, the next in response to some new stimulus, somewhat at odds with it. A significant challenge in developing a certain kind of plausible performance is to portray a complex human, full of contradiction and vulnerability, as most of us are, that ‘lives’ a life of unfolding moments. The performance of imaginative truth, therefore, and dialogue share similar characteristics:

Be it summit diplomacy or the various interactions of private citizens in different lands, genuine dialogue has the kind of intensity described by the great Twentieth-century humanist and philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965) as an encounter ‘on the narrow ridge’ in which the slightest inattention could result in a precipitous fall. Dialogue is indeed this kind of intense, high-risk encounter.<sup>234</sup>

For Ikeda, ‘Dialogue is the initial step in the creation of value. Dialogue is the starting point and unifying force in all human relationships.’<sup>235</sup> Dialogic communication is also an essential part of how a shared sense of imaginative truth is generated in a theatre or opera company.

Current dialogic practice reclaims empathy for the greater good, repositioning it as ‘empathic listening’, or exercising the skill of listening as a service to others.<sup>236</sup> Indeed, there are many modes of ‘listening’ and these take training and skill to master, whether to words, music, visual gestures or other signals. The value of dialogue has therefore been recognised as therapeutic, whether in counselling sessions or larger group settings in a number of ways. First, it encourages people to express themselves, sharing their positive mental functions as well as bringing negative mental tendencies and emotional discontent to the surface, where people can conceptualise their circumstances. Second, dialogue allows for alternative interpretations and constructive reformulations of such discontent and circumstances. Third, a reflective space is created with the potential to liberate people from emotional and conceptual burdens they habitually bear.<sup>237</sup> Such benefits were reportedly felt by a number of my practitioner colleagues (particularly performers) from

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<sup>234</sup> Ikeda, D., *Towards a New Era of Dialogue: Humanism Explored*, Santa Monica, CA: Middle Way Press (2005)

<sup>235</sup> Ikeda, D., *Soka Education: A Buddhist vision for teachers, students and parents*, Santa Monica, CA: Middle Way Press (2001)

<sup>236</sup> Wolvin, A. and Coakley, C., *Listening*, Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education (1995).

<sup>237</sup> Marinoff, L. and Ikeda, D., ‘The Healing Power of Dialogue’ in *The Inner Philosopher: Conversations on Philosophy’s Transformative Power*, (Cambridge, MA: Dialogue Path Press, 2012) p. 102-3.

their engagement in rehearsing the opera productions in my case studies and in our scheduled dialogues.

There are, however, rightly or wrongly those that distrust the motives of others, particularly where emotions and the manipulation of audiences are involved. There have been criticisms levied at the intentions of those who wish to illicit certain emotional responses in others, especially when it comes to rousing people to action or pacifying them using music, theatre, or opera to do so. Augusto Boal, in his influential ‘theatre of the oppressed’, for example, follows Brecht in his critique of Aristotle, who advocated the virtues of empathy and catharsis as a means of social control.<sup>238</sup> Imaginative truth, in these theatrical instances, may be re-appropriated or repositioned to purge audiences of any revolutionary impulses (catharsis in Greek tragedy) or incite them to social action or even political activism (in the theatrical practices advocated by Brecht and Boal). Meanwhile, music and musicology have historically sought some refuge from political wrangling in the idea of an autonomous identity;<sup>239</sup> however, the reception history of Italian *verismo* operas, for example, demonstrates how audiences can vacillate between a cynical resistance to being emotionally manipulated by music and cathartic surrender to moving emotional depictions.<sup>240</sup>

### 5.3 – Bohmian dialogue and suspension

Dialogue, like certain kinds of theatrical performance, invites us to willingly *suspend* our disbelief and judgement in order to ‘imagine with’ or listen to another’s perspective that may move us and/or challenge the assumptions of our own. The dialogic turn in both scholarship and performance practice now tends towards discerning and valuing authenticity in oneself and others. Authenticity is then held in a relationship with truth and truthful representation. To explore this notion further, my book-based research and participation in a series of interdisciplinary workshops<sup>241</sup> on dialogue brought to my

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<sup>238</sup> Boal, A., *Theatre of the Oppressed*, (London: Pluto Classics, 1979).

<sup>239</sup> Swinkin, J., ‘Musical Autonomy and Musical Meaning: A Historical Overview’, *Teaching Performance: A Philosophy of Piano Pedagogy*, Contemporary Philosophies in Theory and Education Series 7. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing (2015) p. 23-32.

<sup>240</sup> See the example of typically mixed reviews of *Suor Angelica* in Wilson, A., *The Puccini problem: Opera, nationalism, and modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>241</sup> These were initially facilitated by Professor Simon Keyes and continue to be held at Taplow Court’s Centre for Applied Buddhism.

attention the work of another significant dialogical thinker, coming from the physical sciences, whose theoretical framework of an ‘implicate order’ resonates with Ikeda’s Buddhist approach to dialogue. Encountering David Bohm’s work has given me a deeper appreciation for the importance of creating space for dialogue in my own directorial practice and a greater understanding of the physics that underpins the so-called New Materialism of creative practitioner-researchers such as Tim Ingold.

David Bohm (1917-1992) was an American theoretical physicist who made innovative contributions to quantum theory, philosophy of mind, and neuropsychology.<sup>242</sup> In Bohm’s later work *On Dialogue* (1990) he sets out ‘A Vision of Dialogue’ as a means of understanding how human thought, feelings, emotions, intentions, and desires function. In practice, Bohmian dialogue is neither solution-focussed nor conducive to outcomes; rather, it acts as a mirror in which participants (ideally between 20 and 40 in number) can observe their own thought processes and inquire into assumptions underlying individual and collective beliefs. A typical Bohmian dialogue session lasts around 2 hours, encourages participatory thinking, listening to others and oneself, being as honest and transparent as possible, suspending judgement, and building on the ideas of others (rather than voicing a series of monologues or position statements). The theory translates in practice to the sharing of personal insights around a particular subject in order to take the group’s investigative thinking further, following the principle of the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Whilst rarely transferable to a rehearsal room in the form Bohm sets out, the principles of his vision of dialogue do translate and are, I would suggest, relevant to dialogical realism. Bohm attempts to describe how attention can be focussed on one aspect of a much more complex whole, without losing connection to a sense of the whole, implicated as it were in all of its parts. I have found it particularly helpful in considering how performance gestures, metaphors or ‘concepts’ for staging a production can be made

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<sup>242</sup> Bohmian thinking about the relationship between the mind and matter originates in his work on wave-particle duality, where a quantum field guides particles such as electrons, or puts form into the motion of the particle. Bohm transposed ideas about this paradox to cognitive science, where information and information processing are central notions; his formulation of ‘active information’ makes a connection between the way information acts at a quantum level and the way information acts in subjective human experience. For a mind-blowing read, see Bohm, D., *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, London and New York: Routledge (1980).

evident throughout the *mise-en-scène* and not just work for one or two scenes, as often appears to be the criticism levelled at ‘concept productions’ of opera.

Integral to Bohm’s hologram-like model of reality and how to apprehend it is his notion of suspension. On the subject of suspension, Bohm writes:

Suspension of thoughts, impulses, judgments, etc., lies at the very heart of Dialogue. It is one of its most important new aspects. It is not easily grasped because the activity is both unfamiliar and subtle. Suspension involves attention, listening and looking and is essential to exploration. Speaking is necessary, of course, for without it there would be little in the Dialogue to explore, but the actual process of exploration takes place during listening - not only to others but to oneself. Suspension involves exposing your reactions, impulses, feelings and opinions in such a way that they can be seen and felt within your own psyche and also be reflected back by others in the group. It does not mean repressing or suppressing or, even, postponing them. It means, simply, giving them your serious attention so that their structures can be noticed while they are actually taking place. If you are able to give attention to, say, the strong feelings that might accompany the expression of a particular thought - either your own or another’s - and to sustain that attention, the activity of the thought process will tend to slow you down. This may permit you to begin to see the deeper meanings underlying your thought process and to sense the often-incoherent structure of any action that you might otherwise carry out automatically. Similarly, if a group is able to suspend such feelings and give its attention to them then the overall process that flows from thought, to feeling, to acting-out within the group, can also slow down and reveal its deeper, more subtle meanings along with any of its implicit distortions, leading to what might be described as a new kind of coherent, collective intelligence.

To suspend thought, impulse, judgment, etc., requires serious attention to the overall process we have been considering - both on one’s own and within a group. This involves what may at first appear to be an arduous kind of work. But if this work is sustained, one’s ability to give such attention constantly develops so that less and less effort is required.<sup>243</sup>

I see relevance here to potential dialogic relationships between rehearsal participants and between productions and audiences. The skill of suspending judgements described above has long been part of Stanislavskian and other rehearsal practices in theatre, alongside and often in order to engage in imaginative improvisation and investigative play. I think it is also the case that the more practised a group is in suspension, the more developed and skilful participants become. In my experience, the skill is increasingly valuable and evident in accomplished performers at the ‘pegging out’ stage of setting a scene for the first time, or walking through production blocking previously documented in rehearsal, either for memory’s sake or as part of a production revival process.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Bohm, D., Factor, D. and Garrett, P. *Dialogue: A Proposal* (1991). Available at: [http://www.infed.org/archives/e-texts/bohm\\_dialogue.htm](http://www.infed.org/archives/e-texts/bohm_dialogue.htm)

<sup>244</sup> In what I am calling accomplished performers, I perceive a ‘connection’ between what a performer is thinking and how they are imagining themselves acting, voicing and feeling moment to moment in their roles. As part of a discursive exploration of a scene ‘on its feet’, under the scrutiny of the director’s eye, it is possible to discover what and how a performer is thinking, or not thinking, through their body as they navigate rehearsal blocking. Accomplished performers have mastered how to manage suspension as part of their process of incorporating ideas they may or may not have generated. They are able to work quickly,

In practice, suspension is a necessary rehearsal skill for performers in opera, as there are multiple layers of detail that require a suspension of judgement whilst various pathways are explored; there is simply too much to focus on at any one time and so ideas ‘percolate’ through such layered territory as motivational maps, musical phrasing, work on text and pronunciation, the timing and execution of choreographic sequences, technical considerations of props, set and costume elements and so forth. An integrated production needs to ‘cook’ over time with the cast and players who navigate and incorporate information at different rates. Singers in particular need to master their craft in stages; however, if they arrive without knowing their music to production rehearsals, it becomes frustrating for everyone; the brain simply cannot cope with constructing newly imagined worlds and choreography on top of shaky musical ground, even with prompters in rehearsals.<sup>245</sup>

One serious consequence of the trend in reducing rehearsal time, especially for opera revivals, is that the process of incorporating production elements is truncated, resulting in ‘undercooked’ performances, in which acting is reduced to singers doing ‘moves’, where production blocking is divested of its connection to character motivation and situation. This is known in the trade as ‘park and bark’. From a dramatic point of view, when singers are locked on the conductor, because of some musical necessity or insecurity, this tends to lead to them falling back on conventional ‘operatic’ gestures, which have little to do with a production’s imagined situation.

The culture of musical preparation comes with an expectation that singers will have incorporated the text and music before production rehearsals begin. This is another reason for scheduling early music calls, to ascertain whether singers are sufficiently well prepared and to set a conductor’s musical tastes and standards with casts. While this kind of ‘knowing’ is increasingly necessary with shorter rehearsal periods, the culture of rehearsing with people only when they are ‘correct’ musically can bleed into the culture of production rehearsals, which is bad for the art form under a dialogical model.

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efficiently and collaboratively because they have some mastery over themselves as a creative instrument, are able to ‘park’ ideas to which they return and develop in their own time.

<sup>245</sup> This is an issue when casting internationally as in different operatic traditions prompters are either not used at all, used only in rehearsal or used all through the process, including at performances.

Suspending judgement as part of performance practice involves willingly ‘suspending disbelief’ in order to explore together the imaginative world of the opera. This can often be de-stabilising as one element of realism fails while another is prioritised for exploration. For example, whenever a new element is added to rehearsing a scene – a piece of new set, an actual prop or costume, a different rehearsal conductor, or repetiteur, or ‘someone important’ enters the room – the performer’s conscious attention shifts to focus on that. Naturally the integration of new information is often at the expense of attention to something else they are tasked with assimilating – the musical phrasing, the technical mechanics of singing, the character’s thought map through the scene, choreography, the correct pronunciation of the language they are singing in, who they should be looking at and listening to in the scene – and ‘turning the volume down’ on other intrusive thoughts. Rehearsals are about layering. The body and brain cannot process and explore everything at the same time, although some performers are, of course, more ‘plastic’ (mentally and physically agile and malleable) than others.

As for the director, the discipline of suspending anxieties as well as judgements transfers with rehearsals from the studio to stage piano rehearsals, which are tantalising but often the most depressing. The detail of relationships and scenes achieved in the studio vanishes when casts encounter actual costume and set, when all the technical elements of a production on stage need to be practised. Directors hope (if they do not have faith) that detail will re-emerge in performers when new technical information has been assimilated during subsequent rehearsals; however, more new information around balancing the sound arrives during staged orchestral rehearsals, and often the dress rehearsal is the first time performers get to run everything together. There is a kind of systematic messiness necessary to the process of rehearsal layering. The most recent layer of detail will take time to sink in, initially obscuring previously discovered depths, until, perhaps like a varnish, that new layer allows all that work to be more apparent. Or, performers will only play the last directorial note and seem to forget almost everything else that has been rehearsed. We return to a leap of faith in the processes of mapping, that all will be embodied in performance, and to Den Tandt’s ‘reality bet’. Bohm’s dialogic ‘flow of meaning’ in the theatrical and operatic context becomes a search for ‘imaginative truth’, or plausibility to the group of the realism being mapped out in stages



through rehearsals. These cartographies hopefully coalesce in and around the live performance but, thankfully, there will always be factors beyond a director's control.

Bohmian dialogue necessarily functions through the giving of attention and speaking. Most directorial methods also rely heavily on observation and on speaking. In as much as opera necessarily functions through music and singing, Bohm's components of suspension include 'attention, listening and looking', implying non-verbal means of expression and perception in the body language of others and one's own body. It is also certainly true that when words fail, physical demonstrations often feature in directorial instruction and feedback to performers. Notes sessions in person, and in the rehearsal or performance space, are often significantly more effective and efficient in direct communication and comprehension than written notes, although the latter are also effective and allow performers to revisit and meditate on them, particularly when followed up in person to iron out any potential confusion.

#### **5.4 – The dialogical self meets the rainbow of desire**

The focus on attention, as much to oneself as to others, as a necessary part of doing dialogue, is taken up and developed in the therapeutic context by Hubert Hermans (born 1937), a Dutch psychologist known for his theory of the Dialogical Self.<sup>246</sup> Key ideas on dialogue developed within a Humanistic Counselling context include 'the society of the self': a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions in the (extended) landscape of the mind.<sup>247</sup> Hermans writes:

We conceptualise the self in terms of a multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions in an imaginal landscape ... The *I* has the possibility to move, as in a space, from one position to another in accordance with change in the situation and in time. The *I* fluctuates among different or even opposed positions. The *I* has the capacity to imaginatively endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between the positions can be established. The voices function like interacting characters in a story ... the dialogical self, in contrast to the individualistic self, is based on the assumption that there are many I-positions that can be adopted by the same person. The *I* in one position can agree, disagree, understand, misunderstand, oppose, contradict, question or even ridicule the *I* in another position.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Hermans, H., 'The Construction and Reconstruction of the Dialogical Self' in *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 16, 2, (2003), 89-13.

<sup>247</sup> Hermans, H., 'Self as a Society of I-Positions: A Dialogical Approach to Counseling' in *Journal of Humanistic Counseling*, 53 (2014), 134-159.

<sup>248</sup> Hermans, H., 'The Dialogical Self: Beyond Individualism and Rationalism' in *American Psychologist*, 47, No 1. (Jan. 1992)

Hermans's theory of the dialogical self strikes me as an internalisation of Mikhail Bakhtin's *heteroglossia* in realist fiction.<sup>249</sup> There is a move from theory to method at the heart of these trends towards dialogism in the relationship between the social and the self. I am reminded of the development of Drama Therapy as a discipline, emerging out of Jacob Moreno's Psychodrama techniques and the political activism and work of Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal, whom I met in Rio de Janeiro in the 1990s.<sup>250</sup> My own experience of Theatre In Education (TIE) in the late 90s owed much to Boal's methods. He theorised that the passivity of the spectator could be broken down through the following steps, by which the spectator becomes the 'spect-actor':

1. Knowing the body (by body he means both the individual body and the collective body in a Marxist sense).
2. Making the body expressive.
3. Using theatre as a language.
4. Using theatre as discourse.

His widely employed *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (1992) is still a resource for education workshops and outreach projects instigated by theatre and opera companies, as well as having influenced Boal's own dialogical approach to *Legislative Theatre: Using Performance to make Politics* (1998). In this regard, theatre and opera become discourses through which to explore notions of 'the self' and society, especially in meta-theatrical works such as *Written On Skin*.

## 5.5 – William Isaacs and the container

As the director of The Dialogue Project at MIT's Leadership Centre, Isaacs's key contribution to the development of ideas on dialogue is the idea of the container, or vessel 'in which the intensities of human activity can safely emerge'.<sup>251</sup> The container is a

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<sup>249</sup> See Bakhtin, M., *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Holquist, M., (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

<sup>250</sup> I am thinking of the development of ideas that took place, largely through recognition of the failure of direct socio-political interventions (invisible theatre) to translate from Brazilian society under military dictatorship to a 'freer' Argentinian society, when Boal was exiled in 1971. The physical, external oppressor and the revolutionary impulse become a theatricalised real-life rehearsal for the liberation of the self from its own internalised oppression. The spectator becomes 'spect-actor'. See the Augusto Boal's foundational *The Theatre of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 1979) and *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>251</sup> Isaacs, W., *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together: A Pioneering Approach to Communicating in Business and in Life*. (New York: Random House, 1999).

‘holding environment’ for dialogue characterised by the following: agreement to the process by those involved, agreement on the capabilities required of participants (listening, respecting, suspending, voicing), a safe purposeful space (time set aside, venue, confidentiality), and agreement about expectations and limits of behaviour, or ground rules. His initial guidelines for dialogue include: suspension of assumptions and certainties by bringing them to the surface, displaying and inquiring into them; slowing down the inquiry; dissolving, reframing and recontextualising assumptions; observing the observer; mindful self-reflection (also known as ‘proprioceptive attention’); befriending polarisation. The guidelines Isaacs describes fulfil Den Tandt’s contracts of reference and reality for his blueprint for dialogical realism. Both descriptors, I think, transpose well to a creative rehearsal space. Moreover, Isaacs details four phases of crisis, instability, inquiry and creativity in the evolution for his ‘container’, which could equally describe the phases of a creative rehearsal process, the lifecycle of creative collaborative relationships, and even relate to the crises within opera as an artistic form.

In my creative practice I have begun to relate Isaacs’s model role of ‘dialogue facilitator’ to that of the opera director, whose task is as follows: to create the container/opera production (responsible for its purpose and safety), model suspension of judgement in the pursuit of imaginative truth, manage participation, cultivate curiosity, probe, clarify, and complete the task. Confronting people with complexity, uncertainty, novelty, deprivation and conflict has been shown scientifically to arouse curiosity.<sup>252</sup> None of these are in short supply in opera. Where the idealised roles of director and dialogue facilitator differ is that a director must make decisions about what to investigate in production rehearsals and so more overtly steers an inquiry, at different phases in the process keeping a looser or tighter hold of the reins, as required (again often heavily influenced by the rehearsal schedule). This brings me to a consideration of the craft of questioning explored by Laura Chasin and her collaborators on the Public Conversation Project and use of Reflective Structured Dialogue.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> See Berlyn, D. (1966, July). ‘Curiosity and Exploration’, in *Science*, 153, 25-33, also Litman, J. and Limerson, T. (2004). ‘The Measurement of curiosity as a feeling of deprivation,’ in *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 82, 147-157.

<sup>253</sup> See <http://www.whatisessential.org/>

## 5.6 – Reflective structured dialogue

With a primary goal of shifting relationships and communication, rather than reaching agreement on issues, the work of the Public Conversations Project promotes dialogue by valuing multiple and even competing perspectives through partnerships. Developed from Family Therapy, key features of the PCP that move my own discussion forward in applying dialogic practice to opera include a facilitated, structured conversation that prevents old, unproductive patterns, enhances listening and encourages reflection. In this sense, the focus on speaking from personal experience, sharing core beliefs and challenging conventional thinking is how reflective structured dialogue might be employed from production design meetings to planning and even featuring as part of rehearsals, given their appropriacy and the time available.

Developing the idea of ‘opera director as facilitator’, the craft of posing ‘questions as a service to the asked’ becomes about asking questions that encourage collaborators and performers to reflect in new ways on their own experience and perspectives on the material. Alongside the giving of instructions, this relates to a director’s role in giving feedback in rehearsals by calling attention to behaviour as a manifestation of assumptions, or unexamined beliefs. Assumptions contribute to our way of navigating reality, but if we are unaware of them, they can lead us to false reasoning. In constructing a plausible imaginative extension of how we experience the real world, unexamined assumptions can weaken the plausibility of a particular realism; we remain unconvinced but cannot express why.

One temptation of performing the directorial role is to attempt to decode assumptions for others, rather than purely identify what appears implausible in a scene, or does not ‘read’ to an outside viewer. For a performer to embody their role convincingly for others, they need not only some mastery over their bodies as expressive instruments but agency to discover and investigate assumptions for themselves, with a little signalling from a disciplined outside eye.<sup>254</sup> It also happens that directors believe their own

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<sup>254</sup> Stanislavski, C., *An Actor Prepares*, p.139: ‘Actors [and singers], like travellers, find many different ways of going to their destination: there are those who really, physically, experience their part, those who reproduce its external form, those who deck themselves with stock tricks and do their acting as though it were a trade, some who make a literary, dry lecture of a part, and those who use the part to show themselves off to advantage before their admirers... How can you prevent yourself from going in the

interpretation of what they have identified as an assumption in others outside of scenes, i.e. inventing subtext to explain someone's behaviour in the real world which, in my view, is rather hubristic and reductive of a person's inherent potential and life's complexity.

It is, nonetheless, important for a director to believe in their own faculties of perception around human behaviour with regards to the dramatic work, particularly in the formative stages of a new production to encourage everyone's commitment to it. If unquestioned, however, from without or within, this can cause problems and misunderstandings, and becomes about whose individual realism is privileged, potentially at the expense of other things and people. This is especially the case if there is disagreement (voiced or unvoiced) among the group about the contractual terms of reference and the imagined reality of the production, commonly ending up with a cast performing as if they were in different productions of the same opera.

### **5.7 – Holoreflexivity and dialogical citizenship**

Lastly, zooming out to the bigger picture, I would like to bring in one last contributor to this discussion, another dialogical thinker, Joseph Camilleri, and his notion of dialogical citizenship.<sup>255</sup> Dialogical citizenship offers a framework of attitudes and behaviour with the aim of uniting humanity across widening divisions in the world, at a time where the modern epoch is said to be drawing to an end, with the erosion of the nation-state and current crisis of citizenship. In *Worlds in Transition: Evolving Governance Across a Stressed Planet* (2009), co-authored by Joseph Camilleri and Jim Falk, limits to sovereignty, empire, national identity, and economic growth are identified as having eroded the institutional bedrock of the nation-state in the modern period. Following an evolutionary paradigm, the growth of international law, regional and global institutions is seen as evidence of how the world is rethinking its situation, across time (in obligations towards future generations, resources and climate change) and space (in relations

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wrong direction? At every junction you should have a well-trained, attentive, disciplined *signal man* [my emphasis]. He is your sense of truth which cooperates with your sense of faith in what you are doing, to keep you on the right track.' In opera, singers are the subjects of notes from language coaches, music staff, conductors, choreographers, directors, designers, stage managers, agents and so on.

<sup>255</sup> Joseph A. Camilleri is emeritus professor at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia where he founded the university's Centre for Dialogue. See: [www.josephcamilleri.org](http://www.josephcamilleri.org)

between communities, societies and states). Camilleri and Falk argue that these trends signal the need for holistic diagnosis of our present global situation and advocate, therefore, what has been termed holoreflexivity. There is a convergence in approach here with both Jameson's and Den Tandt's cartographic attempts to read and situate aesthetic works, as well as in my own frame for 'performing realism'.

The route to holoreflexivity, however, is obstructed or at least impeded on the scale of both the individual human heart and the global atlas of human relations. Countertendencies to holoreflexivity operate through entrenched interests, fear of change, nostalgic, intransigent and parochial mind sets, evidenced on a global scale in the stalemate over international climate change negotiations, nuclear disarmament, and the self-defeating tendency of dominant powers embarking on military expeditions as the answer to intractable social, cultural and economic conflicts.<sup>256</sup> We see this all too vividly in the unfolding disasters in the Middle East, the subsequent displacement of huge numbers of refugees, and in the burgeoning political currency of nationalist rhetoric in Europe and the United States, as well as, of course, in the building of walls.

In an article for the *SGI Quarterly* entitled 'Dialogical Citizenship: The Key to a Habitable Planet', Camilleri identifies three main, closely related challenges to holoreflexivity: 'the lack of a coherent and accountable governance framework; our inability thus far to reconcile the demands of universality and plurality; and the failure to articulate a new understanding of citizenship'.<sup>257</sup> Den Tandt's blueprint for a post-mimetic dialogical realism and Jameson's cognitive mapping are primarily concerned with the second of these in that they are both seeking new forms or ways of interpreting and making cultural artefacts, reimagining ourselves anew in the present situation, with a view to reconciling universality and plurality. Jameson's breadth of cultural reference and insight into the political unconscious meets here with Camilleri's gaze across geopolitical, cultural and ecological space. In today's world, Camilleri argues, citizenship needs to address a far more complex environment than one envisaged by classical democratic theory.<sup>258</sup> Ironically, Brexiteers – amidst the plethora of untruths – argue such

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<sup>256</sup> Camilleri, J.A., *SGI Quarterly; A Buddhist Forum for Peace, Culture and Education*, 87 (January 2017), pp. 16-19.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

classical democratic theory has led the European project to bureaucratic quicksand, and freedom of movement to feelings of disempowerment over legislative and border control.

For Camilleri, being a citizen of Earth today is ‘a multidimensional mosaic of entitlements, obligations, loyalties and forms of belonging’,<sup>259</sup> held in tension across local, national, regional and global boundaries. I would widen Camilleri’s definition of citizenship by adding the dimension of third spaces, or the combination of actual and virtual planes that are now so present in our daily lives through social media and technologically ‘augmented’ realities and experiences of communities in the actual world:

Citizenship can no longer be conceived as a territorially bound concept. While a particular space or community remains a valid object of attachment, such attachment no longer constitutes the exclusive focus of citizenship. The new citizen must be responsive to the exciting opportunities offered by cultural, religious and civilizational diversity in local, national and international settings. I label this emerging form of citizenship ‘dialogical’ rather than ‘cosmopolitan’ or ‘global’ because it conveys more clearly and sharply what distinguishes it from pre-existing notions of citizenship.

Dialogue offers us the most promising bridge between the plural and the universal. Cosmopolitan approaches may be viewed as an advance on the individualistic, state-centric model of citizenship. They fall nevertheless short of the mark because even though they extend the rights and duties of citizenship to all human beings regardless of national boundaries, they continue to express an unhelpful individualism.<sup>260</sup>

As a fellow advocate of dialogue as a pathway to collective solidarity – in the collaborative arts such as opera, as in life – I also find Camilleri’s notion of dialogical citizenship echoes Jameson’s utopian thinking, Den Tandt’s performative ‘reality bet’ and the artist’s faith in their craft to encourage connection and positive transformation. Solidarity in the face of the countertrends to holoreflexivity is becoming increasingly prescient and, more optimistically, manifest. Camilleri makes the point that nationalism is just one of a range of multiple solidarities now coming to the fore operating on religious, tribal, ethnic, racial, civilizational and ecological grounds within national boundaries. Media attention on commemorating the centenary of the suffragette movement, converging with the international ‘Me Too’ campaign and the rights of women and girls across the globe championed by such inspirational figures as Malala Yousafzai might be cited as examples of solidarity on the lines of gender. Also emergent are voices of hitherto disenfranchised youth in political demonstrations and international gatherings of concern about the state of the environment and global ecology. There is a galvanising

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

flow to the evolution of citizenship in the era of late capitalism running counter to dominant media narratives that perpetuate division on political grounds. Indeed, I would argue that my own encounter with and participation in a growing global Buddhist movement forms part of such an awakening in individuals and society. Camilleri urges that the ethos of dialogue, however, needs to be widely shared and carefully nurtured through the cultivation of cultural empathy, or the deep curiosity for and interest in the ‘other’; dialogical citizenship is therefore one of the great challenges of our time.

How does this relate to cultural forms such as opera? To my mind, especially as creative practitioners (and researchers), the stories we are implicated in telling, the environments they are told in and *how* we tell them are all extremely important. Increasingly, our own personal narratives are under scrutiny in determining authenticity in an age of ‘post-factual’ information. As Jameson asserts, narratives or the telling of stories are also forms of ‘sense-making’ of the world, i.e. what we think we can tell about the world system, its geopolitical and economic relations as well as the spatio-temporal constellations of history. Moreover, the form and language that we use to construct narrative has social implications and consequences to that which we pay attention, or gloss over. In other words, opera productions are forms of narrative and of mapping experience; their idiomatic telling is performative and also generative of a sense of place and community. In this light, focusing on corresponding processes rather than product, each new moment of communication is a creative act in itself and leads to questions about how we are communicating, specifically through the medium of opera, and what we are making together. The next chapter, therefore, will focus on primary research material drawn from semi-structured interview transcripts with participants in and around my case study productions.

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## Chapter 3

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### **A discussion of themes in interview transcripts**

#### **Summary:**

What follows are extracts from conversations with colleagues, taken as examples of how they have contributed to my own reflective study and practice. In this sense, these separate conversations have offered me different perspectives and I bring some of these together with a discussion of ideas drawn from text-based research, in order to situate my own discoveries through creative practice and synthesise my findings. Themes emerging from transcripts are discussed in relation to realism, dialogue and value, but there were many others that fall outside the scope of this study and would merit further reflection and analysis.

## 1 – Personal narratives and preparing for performance

The first recorded interview extract is one (characteristically Dutch) singer's response to my initial question about why she works in opera. I interviewed her during the period I was rehearsing in Amsterdam for DNO in 2016, as a colleague and friend from two previous productions together, alongside members of the cast and company of *Ariodante*. For ethical reasons and to preserve her anonymity, I refer to her as Dutch Singer, or DS. Her response encapsulates a common theme and approach in the performers I have interviewed, with which I share an affinity from a northern European tradition of theatre making:

DS – I was interested in acting and wanted to explore acting and singing and the idea of music being theatrical gives it an extra dimension that I like, so that was my first reason to explore opera, and the teamwork and psychology of it, how to see, to work with the team etcetera, so, many social things that you can explore in opera to make the whole product a better thing. You know, making music together is a very important part of music. I think you can almost not leave it out. Making music on your own is a totally different ballgame.

For me music could be an outlet of emotions and made me understand my own emotions much better. Sometimes hearing a piece of music can help you understand aspects of your own life. It's a way of articulating things that cannot be said... and so exploring the person who is singing this particular text, this particular music and melody, for me it meant that there was always a person behind it. It was never an abstract poem. It had to be a person of flesh and blood in order to make it come alive when I was performing it.

So, I suppose I was always searching for subtext, for more information around it to give it reality, I guess. Of course, in trying to find reality you're making up something. It's not reality but to connect it to something real. That could be a certain feeling or disruption in you that I would call a certain kind of understanding. It doesn't mean cognitive understanding necessarily, but to me it's important that an audience understands something of what I'm doing so it's worth something, otherwise it's 'arty-farty'. Maybe I'm an idealist, but I want to add something. I want the world to be a better place through music.

This singer touches upon a significant point in her answer: the way a piece of music, as a human response to an experience of the world, variously invokes emotions and resonates in those who interpret it in performance. The performer and performance of the music then also exists in relation to the experience or idea behind its form. This, in turn, may or may not be transmitted to an audience. The way we tell stories and make music, as well as the music and stories themselves, can thus be seen as ontological for some.

In Fredric Jameson's 2013 formulation, narrative, or the narrative impulse, is one of his two *Antinomies of Realism*. The second is 'affect', or the embodied experience of feelings and emotions. Narrative and affect, according to Jameson, are dialectic forces operating in realism as a mode of artistic production.<sup>261</sup> As a practitioner I find Jameson's theory thought provoking and useful in understanding my own working processes, although I find his attempt to theorise a historical link of this particular expressive mode to 'modernity' less persuasive.

Where I do agree with Jameson is that narrative, or the way we tell stories, reveals a great deal about *how* and *what* we value as well as how we *are* in the world. In my dialogue with her, my same Dutch Singer articulates the paradox of how committing herself to embodying an imagined narrative leads to insights about herself as a person in the world beyond the role she is performing:

DS – When I've spoken with other artists this seems to resonate with them as well, that sometimes when I'm on stage, in performance, I can be more myself than I can in real life. The fact that I'm allowed to be on stage and people come to see me, gives me the freedom to be really what I am, so, yes, although I am pretending on stage, I'm pretending as it were 'me'. I am showing my inner world maybe more than in real life. That's the reason why I have to be a performer. It's a calling. I find truth and value on stage, however weird that sounds. In a way it's a fake world. We're all pretending on stage, but that's the paradox of theatre; you can be more openly yourself and express your inner world. There's a freedom in imagining yourself.

For the young German soprano Annett Fritsch (who performed the role of Ginevra in *Ariodante* in Amsterdam), from an early age it was the fantasy and wonder of the opera that she fell in love with, which has given her a sense of escape from life's hardships and, moreover, a transformational sense of purpose in her professional life. The stage is:

AF – where you can finally be what you have in mind and not be judged all the time as you are in life. Everybody is so much more than what they appear to be. The stage is my safe space where I can be so many parts of myself, but it's more than that. I look inside myself so that I can act this person [the role] and make it real to me. Of course, then it goes into my real life. I'm always looking to identify

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<sup>261</sup> For an instrumentalist's perspective on the importance of 'convincing story-telling' through music, see extracts of my interview with Emma Schied, an oboist and founding member of MCO performing George Benjamin's opera *Written On Skin*, in my table of practitioner's definitions of realism.

and to be able to play. *I think this is why we are here on earth.* When you play you are generous, you connect with other people, to be together, to feel warm and loved.

Both these singers' experiences address the ontological paradox of performance, in contrast to Diderot's famous 'paradox of acting' in which performers do not (need to) experience the emotions they are displaying to be convincing to others. The former perspective articulates how freedom to be oneself is found through the form of acting a role, whereas Diderot's approach argues that technique, or the skilled representation of emotion in a performance need not be felt by the performer for feeling to be communicated to an audience. There are implications here for both the performer and audience around the notion of authenticity, how it is embodied and how it can be discerned in others.

One definition of 'embodied realism', in relation to good acting, might be the plausible imaginative extension of experience, connecting to a performer's 'real' feelings, such as through Stanislavski's techniques of accessing emotional memory or personally identifying with a character's situation.<sup>262</sup> On the other hand, Stanislavski's own later method of physical actions<sup>263</sup> follows an outside-in approach to believable embodiment, adapting the ancient adage of 'right thought (and feeling) follows right action'. In my professional experience, both approaches to acting are still very much part of a performer's craft and need not be mutually exclusive, although their alliance is held in constant tension. Jameson's 'antinomies' are present here in the dialectics of narrative and affect, in the relationship between form and content, producing embodied performance and, for these two singers, an opportunity for freedom of self-expression, discovery and self-actualisation.

Teresa Brennan's theory on the transmission of affect, from a clinical context, takes this kind of experience and inquiry down multi-sensory paths, based on constant communication between individuals and their physical and social environment.<sup>264</sup> In my

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<sup>262</sup> Stanislavski, C., 'Emotion Memory' in *An Actor Prepares*, (England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1967) pp. 153-179. First published in USSR in 1926.

<sup>263</sup> See Galendeyev, V., 'Stanislavski's Method of Physical Actions, and the Emergence of Speech Origination' in *Stanislavski Studies: Practice, Legacy, and Contemporary Theater*, 3:2 (2015), pp. 101-117.

<sup>264</sup> Brennan, T., *The Transmission of Affect* (United States: Cornell University Press, 2004)

own directorial practice, I frequently give notes to performers on technical matters (form), as well as their (in-formed) thoughts and feelings. Following this notion of communication between the individual's senses and their environment, it is my view that dialogical relationships are formed between actual and imagined elements; actual and authentic feelings in performers (and audiences) may be 'triggered' through play, by plausible imaginative contexts and/or by the incorporation of music, becoming most affecting in opera at instances of intersection and in the unfolding of meaning.

There is a difference between the kind of exploratory, playful dialogic space of rehearsals and the performative dialogical realism that takes place between production elements in a performance and encounter with an audience. Many of my performer-interviewees have noted their preference for rehearsals, as a playground and space for the creative exchange and generation of ideas. Once mapped out in rehearsals, however, the metanarrative of an opera production is more or less set, and opera performances offer a different kind of experience for the performer. Sarah Connolly, who was singing the title role in Richard Jones's production of *Ariodante* for the Festival in Aix-en-Provence (2014) and reprised the role for DNO in Amsterdam (2016), offers a seasoned professional perspective in my interview with her:

SC – Sometimes I have this wish that there wasn't a performance and that the rehearsal process was it. I have fantastic feelings and energy on opening nights and afterwards tell myself how ridiculous it is to be a rehearsal junkie. But there is something to be said with the fact that you can keep exploring in rehearsals in a way you can't do in performance because you might put somebody off. You don't know what you're getting. I think you have to stop doing that kind of thing in performance. You can have different inflections, musical decorations. There it's perfectly alright. But if you are supposed to have a handshake, ignore it and do something else that's bad news and you can't do that in performance because it throws out another person's concentration and is considered a little bit bad manners. There are singers and actors who you can't expect to do what you've done in a previous rehearsal and that's because they simply can't remember, or don't wish to, because that's not the way they retain information. I can tell you now it's a headache for colleagues. The little things here and there are ok but when somebody is unpredictable, and they're often people who frequently forget words as well, it's quite risky being on stage with these people and it's not necessarily a good thing and can even be unsafe.

You can never be 100% immersed in what you are doing on stage, 80% yes and 20% awareness of stagecraft security, respect, learning where the lights are so you're not in someone's shadow, or yourself. Going below that 20% stagecraft is dangerous. If you're on your own and you know it's safe, then fine,

but if you're in a crowded scene or something you can't forget your stagecraft. I mean the keyword is *slightly*. Inventing within certain parameters is perfectly acceptable. But it is not acceptable to certain directors...

Due to the complexity of elements that make up opera and many opera productions, the ratio of 80:20 is for many a golden one in safely navigating a successful performance career in opera. Not everyone is made like that, however, and the pursuit of entering a state of 100% 'flow' still drives many of the performers with whom I have spoken. Often these performers experience more of a 'bleed' between the characters they play and their identities in real life, which can cause them and others difficulties. There is some diversity of opinion and experience of this amongst my opera colleagues, but it often falls to the roles of director and conductor to mediate or calibrate the energies of performers towards realising a particular production.

## **2 – Opera productions as 'containers' for dialogue**

At the time of its first revival in Amsterdam, my dialogue with the cast of British puppeteers Kate Colebrook, Louise Kempton, Sam Clarke and Sean McKee involved in the production of *Ariodante* produced insights into how practitioners experience and observe inter-cultural narrative traditions. For me, the following extract demonstrates the richness and importance of experiencing other cultural perspectives when reflecting on our own creative practice:

KC – I now live in France and have really noticed a difference in the theatre scene between London and Paris. In London all the stories are quite emotionally driven, and the way this [*Ariodante*] is being presented... it's heart breaking. When we're doing Ballet 2 ['Sin City'] with the puppets, it's heart breaking and I enjoy that. I enjoy the heartbreak and I enjoy all those aspects of living in your day-to-day life. I find in Paris, the things that I've watched, although I haven't been there for very long, but it's more hypothetically philosophical and existential and answering questions about life but detaching yourself from questions in order to find a response. Whereas in the UK, we put ourselves in the situation in order to find the problem in life or whatever that might be. That's from my experience of being in but mainly from watching shows in Paris and something that I've missed watching and having involvement in theatre in an emotionally invested way.

LK – Is that because you have empathy towards the way we tell stories in the UK?

BD – This production was made for an international opera festival in France, commissioned by the French, perhaps with a view to the way a British team and narrative style might present the opera.

SC – There's a feeling I get when I'm watching it or doing it I like. There's a psychological response to a story and storytelling. I'm imagining it's happening to me and I enjoy the way that affects me and moves me.

From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, the above exchange demonstrates a series of position statements, some reflective, where even the question 'Is that because you have empathy towards the way we tell stories in the UK?' is rhetorical. Although the statements do not directly follow on from one another in a Bohmian 'flow of meaning', they still present thoughtful attempts at understanding between different members of the group through individuals voicing their own reflective thoughts on what has already been shared.

Cultural, as well as individual sensibilities and approaches frequently come into relief in operatic settings simply because of the international mix of people working on productions, often sung in languages other than their mother tongue and rehearsed in countries many of the guest artists do not live in. The group of British puppeteer-actors, for example, had all worked together on a prior occasion (in the theatre production of *Warhorse*) and brought their own micro-culture to the production of this opera, as non-singers.

Richard Jones (the original director of the production of *Ariodante* in this study) concedes in my interview with him that he 'would go mad if he just did opera and couldn't work in theatre', because opera is 'very hothouse and claustrophobic and relies on so many shared and assumed words, and coteries and things like that', however, the excitement of its inflation he finds very tonic:

RJ – I get to see what's in my head with the contribution of many, many other people. I get to think something and then get to see it made real. I think fantasy drives me to do it. There are many theatre directors who are disinclined to opera, but I intuit they disapprove of it on what some would see musically as a lot of detail about character and behaviour, they would construe as excess and purflew... I'm interested in behaviour, because I can't get my head round people, why they're capable of such extremes on the moral compass and how unpredictable they are. I suppose I'm held hostage by a fixation on behaviour and a search to understand people and myself.... I don't think you find meaning. I

think you just put on the opera and that's about self-expression but underlying it there's a parallel quest to find meaning. I'm very satisfied doing it, so it must be about the pursuit [for me]...

Whilst very appreciative of his colleagues' contributions, Jones is unapologetic about what some might see as a self-indulgent commitment to his own vision for a piece. Nonetheless, my experience of him is of someone engaged in a rigorous, imaginative dialogue with himself about his encounter with an opera and the characters in it.

Jones's observation about 'self-expression' with 'a parallel quest to find meaning' is an insight that resonates with Jameson's dialectic of realism. It is interesting to me that he uses the expression 'held hostage by a fixation on behaviour' which also seems to encapsulate a dialectic tension of attraction and repulsion towards behavioural observation that conjoin in his directing, which he says he finds fulfilling. In my experience of assisting him, Richard Jones is exceptionally well prepared for rehearsals, having studied the libretto and score very closely. He has a unique ability to impart considered imaginative solutions to staging operas with his casts in an idiosyncratic way, with warmth and a great deal of humour, expressing the particular depth and vision of his own sense of what it is to be a human being. For me this resonates with Hermans's notion of the dialogical self, as Jones 'get[s] to see what's in my [his] head' in working with a company who endeavour to embody his reading of the opera in question. For this, he is much loved and respected by colleagues (especially those who enjoy the way his mind works) but has often divided the opinion of critics and audiences. On his relationship to audiences he continues:

RJ – I don't think about the audience. I hope the audience enjoy it, but if they don't or are continually baffled or offended, or whatever, I wouldn't get employed...

These great pieces are beacons from the past that say a lot about who we are and how we live and maybe how we shouldn't live. You can't forego that no matter who the audience is, be they congealed by class and or otherwise...

Because of where I came from and the kind of theatre I was brought up on, it does make me a bit queasy about doing something like Glyndebourne, which is a fantastic place, with fantastic people that run it, but then you watch the audience come in and everybody is involved in the fantasy of 'this only happens in this country house that night' with a posh meal and champagne and it's very privileged. A large part of the experience is the grounds and picnic and that's not a bad thing, but there is this trend towards this country house thing that I think does opera no good, because the more that's at large the more it becomes



currency that it's in the main for wealthy people. While I can make my living not in those places, I'm much happier...

I feel similarly torn by the political values on display in operatic environments. Do we, as practitioners, sell ourselves to wealthy patrons for the opportunity to commune with great works and skilled people, for money and prestige? Or, can we position our love for and experience of the art form as separate from the business of it? A number of my colleagues, particularly singers, have suggested that they have come to a crunch point in their own lives around just such questions. Something (usually personal) keeps them doing it, but many leave the opera profession and environment, for reasons extrinsic to their love of the material. In my case study chapter on *Ariodante*, I reflect on the conditions of the production in Chicago and on its censorship; without a pragmatic appreciation for the bigger picture of keeping a dialogue going with audiences, cutting elements of the production could have been very discouraging for me personally, and were indeed upsetting for a number of the singers.

My earlier Dutch singer-friend expresses a narrative about her experience in real life that I think communicates very well the predicament opera, and those who work in it, are in. There are many things possible to discuss and reflect upon in her story (some of which I address in my literature review of research papers around the cultural value of the arts), but it is her willingness to share, explore her own thoughts and communicate her narrative that I personally find moving, inevitably more so because I share some of her history and shall, therefore, include a longer section from her interview here. I ask her, 'why are you now *not* working in opera but still working with music?' to which she replies:

DS – That has a few reasons and not of my choosing. I had an operation on my vocal cords, and I had a very difficult time after that vocally. I had to completely find a new way to sing. I couldn't use it the way I used to at all, so I had to retrain. I continued to do operas, felt a bit out of my depth, but it was ok. Then I had a baby and I was performing very soon after that also because I felt like I had to keep going. I was in the process of building up and I felt that if I withdrew too much I would be out of the scene and the running and also it would be too hard to get back in. So I performed very soon afterwards. I got fired from a job. That was a very traumatic experience that really rocked my world and since then I've hardly done any operas because it really shook my ideas of how I want to live my life. I asked myself very existential questions.

I think, in hindsight, I was depressed for a period after because I was also a young mum and put in a complex light, as I was very happy with my baby. Life at home was fine but in my work it was tough and difficult and I was depressed about that. But it really made me ask myself what it is I wanted from music, and it took me a very long time to find the answer to the question ‘for whom am I performing?’ Am I performing to justify my being on this earth, to give myself a reason, a right to be here? Because if you get the applause, if people are loving what you do, you feel much more like ‘I have a right to be here’. So, I asked myself the question ‘is that why I am performing? Or is it because it’s a calling, and that is the best way I can add something to the world? Is it where I am at my best? Let’s say that’s as a singer. It took me a very long time to find that answer. *Years.*

I did a lot of opera and sang at a lot of the great houses – Salzburg, La Scala, the ROH – great, but I was always a little bit disappointed. I didn’t come from a musical family at all, so when I found the possibilities of music and this transcending feeling it was magical for me. I thought everybody had this idealistic view and was striving to make the world a better place through music.

Coming to Salzburg, for instance, it really is a business, and those are not my core values. Yes, making money is very nice, and I was earning a lot then, and I very much enjoyed it, but it also felt odd, it just felt like ‘why? Does it have any meaning?’ This is Salzburg. This is the Valhalla of the operatic world and so it should be very meaningful what we’re making here. It was good. There were good singers and good orchestras. It was nice, entertaining, there were moving bits, but I didn’t feel like it had found its way into people’s lives in some shape or form. So, yes, I doubted it all the time as well, but I wasn’t so aware of myself at that moment and going with the flow. I was doing what I felt like I *should* be doing, you know?

Also, agents, they all talk about what a career is and you’re just following the *idea* of a career. I now know there are many ways to have a career and that doing your own little idealistic projects is also a career. Money and status: I had big difficulties in letting go of them, especially in the sense of am I worth less now that I’m not earning this money and now that I’m not singing in Milan. But I’m also very grateful for that lesson because I’ve learned that we’re all these tiny little humans and it’s about our own values.

There’s no reason to life. Let’s make this an even broader subject. There’s no reason to life – so you might as well do something that is really valuable to you, so you have to be tuned into it. Especially in opera, people get caught up in the status and the hoo-ha of things. I did too, very easily done. I do think opera has become a vessel for that.

It is very much related to the elite as a complex form. A lot of money is needed to make the productions. It has become like a diamond ring. If you can afford opera you’ve accomplished something. But of course, it shouldn’t just be about the diamond ring, which also stands for something else, you know, it should stand for the love that a person who gave the diamond ring has. But in many instances, of course, it has just become the diamond ring, valued not for its intrinsic qualities as different from other stones but for the value that has been

attached to it like status and wealth, valued for its monetary value and as a status symbol, and not valued for the love of the person who gave it to you.

What if you cannot afford a diamond ring? Is it ‘romantic’ or more ‘real’ to concentrate on the sentiment, or intention behind its offering? What about the provenance and ethical purchase of the diamond? Does this bring into question its intrinsic value? Are we now ‘post-cynical’ of romantic gestures, able to knowingly reframe all clichés, if we wish? These and other such questions, to continue the point of the analogy, might equally be asked of opera in today’s climate. As ‘beacons of the past’ for Richard Jones and ‘storehouses of cultural treasures’ for Pierre Audi (Intendant of DNO when *Ariodante* was presented in Amsterdam in 2016), the intrinsic value of many operatic works is clearly embroiled in a complex interplay of extrinsic factors, for example, how access is gained to such cultural storehouses, where the resources come from to stage performances, who is involved in staging and witnessing them, and so forth.

The fashion for bling is rarely just for its own sake when we investigate it, but, along with sentimentality in music and theatre, is commonly evacuated of authentic feeling. Investing the stories we choose to tell with sincerity, genuine personal sentiment, and something of ourselves, promotes values that perhaps we aspire to live by but find difficult to actualise amidst the confusion and tyranny of ‘images’ that assail us. In the light of her experience and combatting cynicism, my Dutch Singer concludes:

DS – What I feel difficult about the whole subject is that I do *believe* in opera, and so I don’t want to say opera has lost its real value and therefore opera should be discarded. I’m *not* saying that. It is my job to bring my real values and truth to opera and somehow to make it be about that again. And I’m not sure if I have even the power and confidence to make a small change in this but if I can I will try, because I do think opera has a lot to give, if it works it’s wonderful.

From such examples we might surmise that *belief* is expressed through the voicing of values, actions motivated by genuine personal sentiment and narratives that hold meaning for those who are involved as creative practitioners. As a stage director, I often see competing as well as complementary values, personal stories and beliefs brought together (in relative safety) within the ‘container’ of opera productions. There are also often big personalities, personal dramas as well as operatic ones. In spite of this for some, and

perhaps because of it for others, the environment still excites and entices many practitioners to remain working in the art form.

### 3 – Breaking ‘the container’ and tearing down the walls

Performance venues themselves are a major factor in how companies produce and audiences experience ‘the stage’ as a container for realism. This was certainly the case with Baroque theatres and staging traditions at the time Handel wrote his opera *Ariodante*, for example, where acoustic hotspots were built into the architecture and design of stage sets in relation to the position of instrumentalists.<sup>265</sup> Richard Jones’s 2014 production of the opera was necessarily conceived for its premiere at the open air Théâtre de l’Archevêché in Aix-en-Provence, and was adapted where necessary for its co-producing companies and venues. Pierre Audi (then artistic director of the co-producing DNO) is insightful, in my interview with him at the time of reviving the production in 2016, about how architecture exerts its influence over the aesthetic possibilities for opera:

PA – I’ve been breaking the fourth wall throughout my career of making productions. It might help to conceive of an opera house that doesn’t follow a nineteenth century architectural model, but you then have to start with what you are going to put on, and that never happens. Building projects are always prestige projects about the building. They don’t work. I don’t think I will see in my lifetime a twenty-first century opera house that rejects and reinvents the nineteenth century model in the way that the 1950s black box redefined and brought about a re-appreciation of the Elizabethan stage, for example, in which intimacy, epic and the nature of theatre could be much more in dialogue with each other. These kinds of issues are very complicated, they require money to be developed, subsidised and to have the freedom to develop new ways. I don’t see opera finding its own survival genes in the way that film and theatre have managed to do. That’s where we are stuck.

For many opera practitioners another factor in opera staging is the ubiquity of the screen; the popular aesthetic and influence of film and television on visual contexts and stories weighs heavily on contemporary audiences’ expectations, especially in proscenium arch opera house venues.

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<sup>265</sup> Current practice-led research into the eighteenth-century theatre in Drottningholm was shared by Mark Tatlow (University of Stockholm) at the OBERTO conference on Operatic Objects at London’s Senate House on 18/3/2017. ‘Tatlow revealed the participatory role played by the theatre in uniting contemporary and historical operatic practices.’

<https://obertobrookes.com/2017/03/30/operatic-objects-conference-report-by-hayley-fenn/>  
Accessed 8/6/2017.

In the interview, Audi makes it very clear that he does not approve of current trends in broadcasting productions of opera to cinemas, such as those from the MET and ROH, on the grounds that they ‘destroy’ staged productions in favour of close ups on the singers. I am inclined to agree with this, but am less militant in their dismissal, viewing them as a hybrid, derivative form that falls between referential contractual codes and offers a different intermedial operatic experience. I am, however, sympathetic to the view that the imaginative truth of a production is fragile and disruptions to the rehearsed form of its expression (through a secondary filter of recording media, for example) threaten to break what Den Tandt would call its referential and reality contracts; the ‘live’ element is flattened. This is particularly evident when there is little or no dialogue between stage and video directors, but this is getting better in my experience, especially with the development of ‘filmed for DVD release’ and Opera Vision.

#### **4 – Reconciling core values with individual, social and production narratives**

My Dutch Singer’s personal narrative reveals how an individual’s values with regards to music sit, or do not sit, in tension with performance contexts. In my case study chapters, I explore how various scheduling constraints, a company’s rehearsal and performance venues as well as marketing strategies, can greatly influence the conditions of both individual and collective narratives involved in opera productions. At this point, in discussing the implications of sticking to one’s core values amidst potentially opposing societal narratives, I find some useful insights from Jameson’s approach to theory that resonate with the dilemma of reconciling the demands of an individual practitioner’s experience with the narratives around and within a particular production.

In the development of Jameson’s own critical project, a perceived ‘crisis of narratable experience’ is uncovered through a close formal study of sentences and narratives in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Jameson names this narrative crisis the dialectic of ideology and utopia. In the case of opera, this might be said to manifest in the encounter of practitioner and operatic work, and in the case of a revival the production map and the practitioner as orienteer, with their respective capacities for narrative and interpretation. Each will come with their ideological influences and hopes for the future realisation of the opera performance, within a given

social context. The dialectical critic attempts ‘to link together in a single figure two incommensurable realities, two independent codes or systems of signs, two heterogeneous and asymmetrical terms: spirit and matter, the data of individual experience and that of history.’<sup>266</sup> In the case of an opera production working in a realist mode, this is where I would suggest the creative practitioner takes the place of the dialectical critic.

Jameson posits in his theory that ‘Marxism is a way of understanding the objective dimension of history from the outside; existentialism a way of understanding subjective, individual experience.’<sup>267</sup> On the relationship between Marxism and Existentialism Jameson writes: ‘the “search for a method” therefore does not take the form of a reconciliation of contraries, but rather of a kind of unified field theory in which two wholly different ontological phenomena can share a common set of equations and be expressed in a single linguistic or terminological system’.<sup>268</sup> Sartre’s Marxism therefore informs Jameson’s own dialectical reading of history through a focus on the individual’s encounter with cultural forms. In opera, on the level of the individual practitioner and the overall narrative of the show, the unifying field in practice would be working in a realist mode and the co-creation of imaginative truth. The performance in turn constitutes the cultural form encountered – and to an extent co-created – by the public, in an event.

Uncovering our individual core values – whether through dialectical criticism, interviews, dialogue or creative exploration – reminding ourselves of them and restating them in the world is an offering to ourselves to try to live more authentically and truthfully to who we are. In this sense, awakening to our responsibility as practitioners and custodians of an art form, as artists, musicians, and people in society is to acknowledge and assert the values that matter to us personally. As such, there is a relationship between what we value, or believe in, and our sense of responsibility towards

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<sup>266</sup> Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 7.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 207-8.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, p.208, quoted in Tally, Robert T., *Fredric Jameson: The Project of Dialectical Criticism* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), p.49, who summarises the Sartrean totalising theory thus: ‘Marxism considers both subjectivity (in the form of class struggle) and objectivity (in the form of the mode of production) in order to disclose the workings of history itself, which is necessarily both subjective and objective, material and ideal, diachronic and synchronic, and so on.’

representing and embodying those values in performance. This becomes more evident in the interview transcripts of how practitioners conceptualise what they do, as my questioning ‘why’ steered interviewees towards more abstract thinking.

## **5 – Practitioner definitions of realism**

How have my opera colleagues answered when asked what they understand by the term ‘realism’ and if it relates to what they do in any way? There is a broad range of opinion, as might be expected, with some common themes and elements that certainly challenge as well as resonate with some of the theory already outlined. I have extrapolated (from interview transcripts) a representative selection of their answers and definitions, creating a document (in the Appendix) that places collaborators’ answers alongside one another in dialogue with each other, so to speak, and with my case study chapters. In the body of the present text, I draw attention to just some of these (and to material from dialogues I have had with colleagues outside of my case study productions) that I think illuminate praxis.

For some of the instrumentalists I interviewed, who were English, Dutch, Swedish and German, communicating a personal understanding of a *story* is important ‘in order to play more convincingly’ with ‘meaning behind every musical gesture’, *especially* if it is an instrumental piece of music. I see a connection here between the relationship *subtext* has to a working understanding of realism voiced by the British puppeteers (in *Ariodante*) and that voiced by orchestral players (in *Written On Skin*). Subtext can be understood to refer to what is implied by the text, or reading between the lines, as such. For the puppeteers, ‘subtext in life is everything really [...] because it’s what you really mean’, whereas the ‘text’ or form (be it musical notation, sung text or puppetry) has inherent qualities that shape or frame the subtext. The process of creating or interpreting subtext ‘aids being able to relate to something and be totally immersed in it’; moreover, it ‘makes imagining easier, or you imagine less’. Uncovering a coherent subtext, therefore, is part of realist practice.

Realism, after some discussion between string players, was thought to connect a sense of responsibility for playing a part with others in something greater than oneself, which also related to ‘belief in what you’re doing’, the experience of time, or temporality, and ‘presence’ as a performer. These connections were thought to be held in tension

through the control and release of emotional expression. Bas (a Dutch violinist with MCO during the tour of my semi-staged version of *Written On Skin*, in my joint interview/dialogue with him and Swedish violinist, Malin) voiced that: ‘I think in a way the more responsible I feel, the more real an experience is for me as well.’

From these examples I would assert that a sense of agency is gained by taking personal responsibility for engagement with the material of opera. For practitioners this involves a degree of personal preparation and self-discipline, committing to imagining and co-creating a level of subtext that informs interpretation, thereby shaping both their own and shared experiences of it. Practitioners also voiced that audiences might engage in the same way (through their own preparations and by willingly suspending their disbelief). In other words, a level of investment of oneself is an intrinsic part of working in and experiencing opera in a realist mode. Den Tandt’s blueprint formulation also acknowledges this, stating that reflexivity through *mise-en-abîme* (or self-embedment) is one of dialogical realism’s defining and meta-discursive features.<sup>269</sup> However, in tension with the idea of ‘investing of oneself’ in performance would seem to be the consideration of ‘accessibility’, or communication with those who have not ‘prepared’ for their encounter with opera. This is not just a case of ‘you get out what you put in’. Finding the right way to engage with and communicate operatic material remains a contentious subject amongst practitioners, let alone audiences.

Composer George Benjamin and his librettist Martin Crimp (both British) voice a typically self-conscious, postmodern view: opera in the twenty-first century should acknowledge the machinery of its idiom, and only then through layered artifice can you create a space for authenticity. They use the Brechtian device of self-narration, taking the

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<sup>269</sup> As a reminder, Den Tandt’s blueprint features of contemporary realism are firstly heuristic (fact-finding): investigative, researching and inter-medial in relation to our perceptual experience of the world. Secondly, dialogical realism is reflexive (meta-discursive): e.g. through self-embedment (which in the context of opera, I understand to refer to the paradox of the simultaneous presence of the performer and their persona, as well as to a musical work and its interpretation), other examples of reflexivity include impersonation and pastiche. Thirdly, dialogical realism is contractual: implicit transactions make up the ‘referential contract’; performative negotiations make up the ‘reality contract’. Both must function simultaneously to support a psychologically congruent, or plausible lifeworld. Fourthly, dialogical realism is a mode in praxis (action-oriented): testing the limits of physical feasibility and the practical contingencies of situated-ness. Following the logic of the ‘reality bet’ (the optimistic belief that consensus can be reached), dialogical realism is a performative practice of looking more closely at what we know, reminding us of it and transforming that knowledge into experience. Extrapolated from chapter 7 of Den Tandt’s *On Virtual Grounds: Blueprint for a Post-Mimetic Dialogical Realism*.



meta-position in an attempt to then paradoxically return to naturalism (trying to recreate daily life in real time): stylistically the reverse of ‘the play within a play’ idea. There is distrust towards less artificially declared attempts at naturalism, especially in opera, because contemporary audiences are always aware they are watching a heightened form of performance. Realism in contemporary opera has had to respond to the ubiquity of film, so ritual or anti-opera becomes more plausible to these primary collaborators.

For Canadian soprano Barbara Hannigan, realism in opera means ‘playing it as if she were in a film in close up’. She needs to identify with and understand her characters, emotionally and psychologically. This contemporary music specialist makes drawings and maps to help her memorize the music but will not sing out fully until she has incorporated an emotional and psychological understanding of her role through rehearsals. Hence, her embodied commitment comes with a belief in rehearsal maps to hold meaning. Making music is her ‘first love’; there is a spiritual communion in the rare level of attention afforded to the music.

For British mezzo Sarah Connolly, it is the director’s sense of realism that she is in service to, which she finds both challenging and very rewarding, but she too needs to find *something* she can identify with personally in the roles she performs. Her embodied interpretations are therefore framed as ‘encounters’ and ‘negotiations’ with a director’s vision for her role. This attitude to embodying a role contrasts with that of Italian mezzo Sonia Prina, who declares that she mainly plays roles that are nothing like her as a person in real life; the attraction is to play at being someone else. Nevertheless, she admits playing ‘a really evil bastard’ (as opposed to a pantomime villain) takes her a long time to get out of her system.

For other British singers, such as Victoria Simmonds and Robert Murray, the context and story itself needs to be easily understood, with enough of a history and subtext for them to behave naturally within. Realism should not be about a concept; rather, it is about strong relationships between believable characters. I infer from these experienced performers a level of frustration with abstraction in some approaches to staging opera; they express an amused befuddlement with many of the things they have been asked to do but did not relate to in ‘concept’ productions.

For British baritone Christopher Purves, a level of trust in a director to set an environment of play ‘in which to be and discover myself’ begets ‘eruptions from the unconscious’ and glimpses of truthfulness that are shaped together, in a similar idea to the way Bohmian dialogue offers glimpses into an underlying implicate order or truth. Realism then is achieved ‘mostly through soft power and play’, within imaginative expressions of hard power such as Stanislavskian ‘givens’, set parameters and Den Tandt’s contractual terms. Problems arise when contractual terms are not the same or collaborators ‘play by different sets of rules’. Following this theme, for Italian staff director Simon Lorio, ‘realism is a process of and belief in removing blocks to imaginative truth, to somehow marry imagination, playfulness and intellect’, whilst for French répétiteur Alfonse Cémin it is a ‘translation’ of the ‘intellectual highs and emotive lows of real life into theatrical and musical articulation’. For German soprano Annett Fritsch, however, art is ‘something you put your mind and heart into’ and ‘cannot be too realistic because then where is the heart and what’s the point? What do you want to say with it? You need a balance between being real and ideas; it’s a matter of balance and taste’.

There have been those from a number of disciplines within opera (production, orchestra, stage management, administration) and nationalities (American, German, British, Italian) that did not understand or like the term ‘realism’, were suspicious of it or rejected it altogether. For American lighting designer Mimi Jordan Sherin, for example, ‘the term “realism” doesn’t compute’. Even so, Klaus Bertisch, a German dramaturg working at Dutch National Opera admits that very often the term comes into the work. British director Richard Jones, with whom I have worked many times, rejects the term ‘realism’, voicing that when things, characters and behaviour are ‘psychologically congruent’ it can be useful, but that ultimately the stage is a poetic space and good theatre should take you somewhere primal.

## **6 – Tensions between story and narrative concept**

As the result of my interview with Pierre Audi, I began contemplating the hypothesis of a dialectic operating in the aesthetic traditions of opera in Europe, namely one of narrative

context and abstraction. The journey of Pierre Audi's own artistic ambitions evidence something of this, in his own words, from the interview transcript:

PA – I entered opera through contemporary music, which took the theatre subject and transformed it into a subliminal experience – something which straight theatre can't do. I discovered in myself an affinity with modern music and an ability to remember and direct it without having to prepare a complicated score. In [establishing] the Almeida Theatre I was also making the statement that realism was not the only basis on which to make theatre. That opened up for theatre makers in the UK, many of whom are still working, but took a long time to filter through the English system, which is still based on realism but opened up a little bit to abstraction – just not to the extent that I have promoted here in the Netherlands.

My own journey from working in theatre in the UK followed a similar route to seeing the potential for greater creative freedom in opera, not only because of the musical dimension but also because of the resources and ambition required to work at scale in a climate where experimentation was not dependent on commercial viability. Whilst I would agree that the commercial and mainstream British theatre still evidences a very strong attachment to a naturalistic aesthetic (which is how I interpret Pierre Audi's use of the term 'realism' in this instance), I would argue that narrative, and therefore context, is still extremely important to the effective communication of a discernible story in more avant-garde performances, to empathy with any of the characters in it, and to relationships between performers. I have had a number of disagreements with collaborators in the past on this topic, particularly working within contemporary dance environments where 'moments of narrative' might be glimpsed out of an abstracted movement vocabulary, or 'pure dance', that leaves me personally less empathetic, to my mind borders on the gymnastic, and leaves me fascinated rather than moved by dancers' technical virtuosity and physical beauty. In this respect, I declare my bias. I confess to an emotional appetite for narrative contexts but am admittedly moved beyond them by the rhizomatic connections music affects in me. Pierre Audi speaks eloquently of this in the continuing interview transcript:

PA – Contemporary composers have been the most liberated of artists from realism. It is okay to deconstruct stories in contemporary music. Very much British theatre is a realistic tradition and still prioritises contexts. I have been more interested in individual works. The personal side is important to me, going into and appealing to the audience on a psychic level rather than an intellectual level. I stumbled upon this by doing a modern opera. I was rejecting the theatre

climate in London, whilst also learning the operatic repertoire by watching many conservative productions at Covent Garden. The subliminal levels of a story are awakened in music – tapping those is the most emotional level that opera can reach where straight theatre cannot.

Opera is important because it brings people in touch with a very important storehouse of cultural treasures. There are many personal works about our mortality, many about our history and cultural heritage, and also opera is a pioneering art form that is still searching and metamorphosing.

The hypothesis of a dialectic of narrative context and abstraction in opera productions (very close to Jameson's antinomies of realism: narrative and affect) could be seen to operate in the 'concept production', where certain cultural stories and music are well known to their audiences, which is perhaps one reason why there are more concept productions made and accepted in Germany, although not of course without contention. This could be one legacy of Brechtian 'epic theatre', with its emphasis on challenging its audience to 'awake' from living vicariously through feelings of empathy for a story's protagonists. Brecht's estrangement devices may well have been taken too far, for some, when they depart from the recognisable contexts of the material in some concept productions; we may have little or no empathy with those in their stories; the intellect is prioritised above feelings for or with characters in an opera, or they are assumed to exist through cultural familiarity. This then logically raises questions about how much we personally and collectively experience and care about characters, the opera's themes, or even the art form itself.

The sheer number of opera houses, how they are funded and the value German society places on them, compared with other nations, also contrasts with a much smaller number of opera producing venues in other countries, and may be a factor in aesthetic choices of how to stage another new production of an opera by Mozart or Wagner. The intellectual tradition of director training in Germany (as opposed to a largely practical one) is another factor in this argument, whereas virtually no formal opera director training existed in the UK, until very recently, other than hands on, through assisting established directors on productions.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> RWCMD and WNO announced the launch of the first MA course in opera directing in the UK in 2017, following the first-of-their-kind training workshops for aspiring opera directors organized by the National Opera Studio in 2016.

Oliver Mears (then Artistic Director of Northern Ireland Opera when I interviewed him in Cardiff, in 2016, and now Director of Opera at Royal Opera House Covent Garden) voiced his position, as a British-trained opera director, on the subject of ‘alienation’:

OM – Opera is a fundamentally unrealistic genre but has been punctuated throughout its history by efforts to make it more realistic... It’s about a degree of theatrical truth. It’s also about limiting the amount of alienation there is on stage. If people (singers) perform in an excessively artificial or grandiose way the ‘irrealism’ (if that is a word) of opera is magnified. All my career has been about trying to share what’s amazing about opera and trying to limit what’s alienating about opera... singers who treat opera like the concert platform and just want to stand down stage centre and sing their aria and that’s it – that’s the opposite of my practice and would be to most people practising in the UK, in fact one of the strengths of the UK tradition is that there’s limited patience on both sides of the curtain for that kind of approach.

Belief and plausibility are really important but not reductive, as the expression of truth can be stylised but psychologically believable and visually compelling; stylisation can have more impact, can punctuate and express ideas more forcefully than other aesthetic traditions, for example. Also, creators have operated within the stylised conventions of the form at various times in history, such as Verdi and the nineteenth-century conventions of big choral finales and repeats and so forth.

Opera shouldn’t just be decorative, about escapism or nostalgia, as is still the danger in using period costumes and beautiful sets. In my experience singers really like a psychological approach, but don’t like the intellectual talking stuff (as you might get at the beginning of rehearsing a play, discussing it while sitting round a table). They like to do through action.

On the point of artistic value, like Stanislavski, I want the audience to appreciate the art form. As an extreme art form, opera has the potential to express truth in the most overwhelming way.

I would agree with much of the above, underlining the distinction between realism as a genre and as a trans-historical mode, or way of working, that strives for ‘psychological congruence’ (as director Richard Jones voices) in whatever narrative techniques or styles it employs.

## **7 – Creative practitioners on valuing opera and what they do**

I mentioned earlier that I found Dutch Singer’s personal story around her involvement with opera moving. George Benjamin, composer and conductor of *Written On Skin*, expressed his reason for working in opera in similar terms: ‘I’ve always loved opera and I

find it the most moving medium of anything that exists in the arts... when it works it's just the best thing.' The following extract from the transcript of my recorded interview with George Benjamin investigates the value and importance he attributes to being 'moved' by his experience of opera. He identifies that for him there is something beyond 'extremely valuable' and 'valid' approaches to culture with 'a greater degree of profundity than you get in normal life'. He uses the words 'love', 'heart', 'soul', and 'connection' to imply that opera and the arts have the potential to affect those things, to be 'profoundly' meaningful and guiding in his life, beyond just the 'rational mind'. Benjamin cites access to 'personal truth', 'your own nature', 'your taste and the things you love' through the arts, experiencing what he calls 'your deepest emotions'. I asked him:

BD – Why is it important for you to be moved? You said it was the moving thing.

GB – That's a good and difficult question, difficult to answer. I don't think it's important to me to, I wouldn't say it's a prescription to be moved, I can have a numerous variety of approaches to cultural things that can still be valid, I think extremely valuable without necessarily describing them as moving, but if you are moved it's the work of an artist speaking to you in a very deep way. And it's making you perhaps understand the world, and your place in the world and the meaning of things, with a greater degree of profundity than you get in normal life. And also, if you are moved, it means that your connection to what you're perceiving or experiencing is very deep, and that says something about your own nature, about your taste and the things that you love the most I suppose. I mean the word 'love' is involved when you're moved deeply, then yes, your deepest emotions obviously are involved and there's some truth in that. Personal truth. And so, I mean if one was rather odd one would go the other way and escape anything that moved you deeply and that would be very bizarre. Contradictory, and I think you should follow your soul and your heart, which often is more about what you understand and care for than your rational mind, though the two or three are very connected as well. That's the best I can answer.

BD – So, love, being moved profoundly. Is that to do with meaning, profundity?

GB – Yes.

BD – Making sense of things, is that important to you?

GB – No, it's not as rational as that. It's just that the journey across a large-scale piece like *Wozzeck* or *Pelléas* or *Katya Kabanova* there's just something, the quality of the material is magnificent, and the formal construction is magnificent,

and there's something right about those works, and also they complete. That's what we search for in the arts in the end, some form of completion, and it gives the model even if the stories are deeply, deeply tragic. Perhaps if they are deeply tragic equally it gives a view of the universe where it's possible to complete, and where things make sense, and there seems to be some reason if not purpose even behind suffering and man's tragic, often very tragic predicament, that sense of completion and fullness. Unity is something you would, you can't find in the confusing world very often and that experience is important, I think.

And funnily enough it's a sort of joy. That's what's so strange it's a source of great joy even though the stories that have been told are deeply tragic. We search for meaning in our lives and our place in the world and beyond and it's very hard to find it. Perhaps in a funny way, though they're very disturbing, they also give a solace. Plus, there is also the fact that I am a musician and I loved music from the first time I discovered it, and that's a very deep and passionate love that I have for it. And I can't help, at least if I'm in the right frame of mind, to respond in every way to it and that's a centre of my life, and has been, and always will be, and so it's something I can't resist.

From the above extract, then, a personal encounter with music and opera – because of their formal construction and ability to trigger deep emotion – may offer another sort of experience, or ‘communion with completion’. The operatic works Benjamin cites here are not specifically ‘spiritual’ or religious in their subject matter. He identifies ‘something right about those works’; appreciating their ‘magnificent’ quality and form, things that he clearly admires and places great value in.<sup>271</sup> He speaks about ‘a sort of joy’ that I interpret as indicating a level of appreciation or wonder at a performance or work's expressive or intellectual achievement. He also suggests that great operatic works ‘give a solace’ for life's suffering and confusion. This, perhaps, relates to Aristotle's catharsis or to the consolations wrought from music or philosophy. In any case, for Benjamin, the value of operatic works comes from many places at once, as music is at the centre of his life and something, much like Richard Jones, he ‘can't resist’.

A number of other colleagues I have interviewed, working at the highest levels of the art form, identify and prescribe a value to their interaction with opera that is ‘beyond’ meaning in a purely ‘rational’ sense, whether it is a ‘belief’ in it as for Dutch Singer or a compulsion, one that it is impossible to distil into any sort of single theoretical

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<sup>271</sup> George Benjamin is not alone in his valuing of ‘quality’. This was high on many interviewees' lists of reasons for working in opera: quality of material, of working environment, of collaborators, of people and pay (relative to other artistic platforms).

explanation or ‘spine meaning’ – one of the criticisms Richard Jones levels at both the world of academia and German theatre. My interview with him in Amsterdam, when he arrived during the latter stages of rehearsals for *Ariodante*, included a sobering befuddlement with my own choice as a practitioner to enter an academic research environment:

RJ – My experience of people who went to Oxford and Cambridge is that the intellect is respected before the imagination and in theatre that’s a worry. I think academia is fucking bananas. I think it’s *crazy* with all its structuralism and post-modernism and Lukács. I think it’s nutty and evil with its dogma and I’m so glad I don’t have to be involved in that world - God Almighty! I think on the first day I can go in and say that *Ariodante* deals in naïveté, betrayal and influence in a naïve community, but I can’t say what it *means* because it means too many things at once.

BD – One of the issues you have with academia is...?

RJ – That it seeks a kind of spine meaning and German theatre seeks a concept or spine, so you hold it up in the light and go ‘it says this’ and ‘I’m right’. So, it often robs it of poetry. And poetry usually is the realm of the unsaid or the implied and is much more interesting and something theatre is much more effective at. And, ultimately why I think we are all interested in it. I think we have amnesia about that interest, or that initial draw. The initial draw is poetic.

Jones’s concern with the Oxbridge cultural elite in theatre (by which he means to include opera) – that intellect is privileged above the imagination affecting the institutional expression of theatre through to its very language – is also relevant to the arguments around democratising opera (as an *elite* art form all can appreciate, rather than being *elitist* per se) particularly when it is publicly funded.

One of the challenges facing those who champion diversity within and accessibility to opera is the fact that people of privilege, schooled in a particular intellectual tradition, occupy many of the UK’s most influential jobs in the arts (and opera is flooded with them). This particular class-based ‘filter bubble’ is still arguably even more prevalent in opera than in other forms of theatre in the UK, in spite of efforts to broaden its audience reach. Class and education are thus clearly a factor contributing to how practitioners themselves ‘got into opera’ and speak about what they believe in and value.



Many opera makers and reviewers believe Jones to be a brilliant stage director, so his diagnosis of a troubling displacement of the intellect and imagination at the very highest levels of the art form, and distrust of academic theory, is telling of ‘a disconnect’ between theory and practice. Such a disconnect points to the need for greater dialogue and reciprocity between the two in and about opera. The ideological ‘problem values’ Jones identifies within theatrical institutions (intellect over imagination) has its parallel in academic circles and performance studies: ‘understanding “the page” is regarded as sufficient for creating and understanding “the stage”, and analysis is assigned the function of revealing facts about both the score and about its performances.’<sup>272</sup> I would agree that academic research methods, such as analysis, and grappling with theory and concepts have increased my own critical and conceptual thinking – valuable in many ways in preparing to direct opera – opening my eyes to new wonder at the complexity of works and the abilities of those that master them. Yet, I experience their numbing effects also, such as in a professional need to ‘suspend’ my own feelings whilst concentrating on everyone else’s; thousands of hours in rehearsal rooms intensely and critically watching people, for example, means that I sometimes find it difficult to switch off my directorial eye and simply enjoy the experience of being a member of the public, or an audience member of a performance I have not worked on shaping. Nevertheless, I am minded to acknowledge certain reciprocities; dialogue and mutual respect between analysis and creative practice, I believe, have the potential to harness their respective strengths, identify concomitant assumptions and move towards apprehending more useful, truthful and compelling insights.

Jones’s point about the poetic in theatre seems to have something in common with Benjamin’s point about personal communion, through metaphor and symbol, with something wonderful, awe-inspiring, and deeply moving particular to opera that attracts and nourishes them spiritually. This is what I think they believe should be accessible to everyone, not just a social or academic elite, through an encounter with opera. Although it requires an elite level of skill to make and perform well, opera can be appreciated by

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<sup>272</sup> For an admirable practitioner-researcher’s perspective, see Mine Dogantan-Dack’s critique of Jeffrey Swinkin’s *Performative Analysis: Reimagining Music Theory for Performance* (2016) in her review article ‘Once Again: Page and Stage’ for *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* (2017) Vol.142, No.2, 445-460. Quoted p.450.

anyone for its communicative power. In my same interview with him after the dress rehearsal of *Ariodante* in front of an audience, Jones cites an example of how opera as theatre, in his view, should take you to ‘a primal place’:

RJ – I think Sarah Connolly doing ‘Scherza infida’ – which we have seen too many times, we are the hothouse plants and we’ve the blunt response to it now – but just feeling that audience’s response to it as a connection to a feeling of depression and expression of impotence and it was very rewarding to them. I can’t take that away. I know it. I can smell it in the auditorium, and I think that’s what theatre does well. And because a lot of people are sitting together it’s a kind of communal experience and it’s very strong. Everyone sitting in the room experiencing that comic that makes the room laugh and laugh or that singer, that amazing singer making you connect with something you might struggle with but is symbolised or expressed in music that’s amazing. It’s amazing. To be taken to a weird, queer place is absolutely essential, and have a bit of a tingle is absolutely essential in every theatre performance.

Thus, for Jones, even those ‘blunted’ by over-exposure or an overactive critical eye can still appreciate ‘amazing’ (out of the ordinary and affecting) human expression and participate in the visceral, communal, live experience.

Klaus Bertisch, dramaturg at DNO in Amsterdam, adds something to my discussion of what is valued in opera by practitioners in describing his professional role and relationship with a director:

KB – In my job, I find an explanation and the director goes with it, where explanation is just helping him to go on. The director has to have a vision, a line and clarity of his storytelling, or a confusion of his storytelling, but I have to know the explanation.

Meaning is very important, and also for us as a team and for the audience you have to be able to go beyond. If you understand the meaning you can go further. You can leave the meaning behind. And don’t necessarily need to do the meaning you understand from the text, because your emphasis is different and you’re putting the emphasis on something else. So you can go beyond, I find.

What is referred to here is ‘going beyond the literal and conventional’ understanding of operatic works, particularly those in standard repertoire: something that tests the boundaries of reference and reality for every audience and critic. Klaus Bertisch cites the example of a door (ubiquitous in opera plots and sets) with particular reference to *Ariodante*: the necessity of its legibility to an audience within a design, practical qualities of providing entrances and exits, closing off and opening up access to spaces, how it is used for overhearing and hiding, and how it moves. The representation of its

metaphorical and symbolic significance, over and above the literal meaning of an actual door can ‘go beyond’ the functional and mimetic into more conceptual realms.

I argue in my case study chapter on ‘Staging *Ariodante*’ that the heightened idiom of opera tests our capacity for suspension of disbelief by inviting practitioners and audiences to be imaginatively complicit in the metanarrative of an opera production. Thus opera lends itself to the investigation of metaphor through dialogic approaches. Where contemporary design in opera productions might be seen to move between fashions for abstraction, expressionism and naturalism, opera’s paratexts of surtitles, pre-performance talks, programme notes and ‘insight’ material are burgeoning in an attempt to broaden the appreciation of its forms and audience access to opera. The danger with these is that they become didactic rather than existing in dialogic relationship to the production and may be more truthfully part of the dialectical relationship between performance and documentation and a paradoxical appropriation of Brechtian captioning meant to distance audiences from being emotionally manipulated. The proliferation of surtitles, performance notes and programmes may also render sonic practice generally as secondary to academic discourse, with the implication that performance without textual ‘support’ is somehow lesser, or indeed regarded as greater when the audience is an initiated elite.

In summarising the selected themes thus far discussed, and perhaps drawing some conclusions from the above examples, it appears that creative practitioners voice their experience of music and the arts as being significantly more than just rational meaning making, although meaning is important in forming connections and feeling connected. To work in a realist mode, to be plausible, involves the conjunction of personal narrative with an opera production’s metanarrative. There is the poetic and affective experience of being moved. This resists being singularly defined through analysis. Jameson makes a distinction between feelings as phenomenological experiences and the naming of them as emotions, which are culturally and historically recognised, identified and morally positioned. There are affective experiences, in his theory of modernity, that human beings experience newly as a result of technological and resultant social changes, and these may find some articulation through the most attuned artistic expression. In the encounter with

opera, for example, we may be moved or alienated but, without interrogation of ourselves as much as the event, not understand or be able to articulate why.

For George Benjamin, there is a yearning in the arts for some form of ‘completion’ amidst the incompleteness of life that is about an almost spiritual sense of connection, or joy. For Dutch Singer, Barbara Hannigan, or Richard Jones, involvement with opera is largely about communion with great works, a creative community and self-expression. For Klaus Bertisch, Pierre Audi and many ‘progressive’ production teams the making of opera productions is about an exploration of the liminal (in between), opening portals to the subliminal through music, and going beyond meanings already dulled by convention. This chimes with Den Tandt’s theoretical blueprint for a contemporary, post-mimetic form of realism and also with Jameson’s reading of cultural works in the era of late capitalism as cognitive mappings of a ‘political unconscious’. For each of my practitioner examples there is a personal story that brings any abstract reasoning about why practitioners are involved in opera back in contact with their actual experience and informs their belief in the value of the art form to individuals and to society. George Benjamin answers the question of what opera is worth to society by choosing to reposition the question:

GB – What would happen if we didn’t have music? If we didn’t have music, if we didn’t have opera in our civilisation, something intensely serious about civilisation’s gone wrong there. We don’t only exist to survive, to eat, to exist, to enjoy material goods. There’s a different side to us and that needs to be fed, and that side is very all the more precious in such a commercial and such a mechanistic world that we live in now. There’s a need for that in people. They often aren’t given the tools by which to express it or to interpret it or to understand it or appreciate it, or the access, and that is a universal thing. And their lives are inexorably, vastly enriched by having a sort of core, in their soul, expanded and enriched by contact to such things, and if it wasn’t there, then it’s a sign of waning civilisation and approaching a sort of industrial, mechanised world without value. So, often with things, when it’s quite difficult to describe their value in themselves, to go the other way and express what might be the case if they were absent, we’d understand, even though they’re not, they may never be the most popular things in our civilisation. If they were missing, then my feeling is that’s the time to skip the planet.

Yet, the ‘unthinkable absence’ of opera from ‘our civilisation’ has not stopped councils and governments from slashing public funding for the arts in general, impacting heavily

on companies producing opera across Europe, at least in the forms and with the budgets they have been used to.

Clearly, what is unthinkable to some registers very differently for others; we share in ‘our civilisation’ to the extent to which we expand our sense of collective identity and interrogate the relative meaning of ‘civilisation’, *whose* civilisation is the focus of our attention and, indeed, who *we* are.<sup>273</sup> The point here is that civilisation is a matrix of performative expressions of value and that opera productions, as potential catalysts and containers for dialogue, may be oases for some whose lives are ‘expanded and enriched by contact to such things’, and sites of contention to others.

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<sup>273</sup> In this respect, I see some convergence with the Flemish report on *Culture: The Substructure for a European Common* (2014) and the pre-Brexit notion of a diverse European community who share in a cultural reservoir and repertoire of signs contained by a shared set of values, namely a supposedly unifying commitment to democracy. Following the UK’s referendum result to leave the EU, however, deeper political divisions within ‘the common’ (that were likely always there) have been brought to the surface narrative and more clearly delineate where values are shared as well as those that are not.

## 8 – Appendix: Examples of PRACITIONER DEFINITIONS OF 'REALISM'

**Production:** WRITTEN ON SKIN semi-staging, Mahler Chamber Orchestra European tour 2016

PROFESSIONAL ROLE	WORKING DEFINITIONs (drawn from interview transcripts)
Composer, conductor	<p>19th Century opera took realism as far as it could. In the light of film, in the 21st Century, better to take a Brechtian approach to realism: ritualistic opera, anti-opera</p> <p><b>"lift the narrative off the floor"</b></p> <p><b>realism in a bubble, <i>not</i> naturalism, layered artifice, "linked inexorably to the music"</b></p> <p>acknowledge the machinery of the idiom, which then paradoxically, can return to naturalism</p> <p><b>importance of borders, clarity of definition, purpose and control for 'magic' context/connection to the real: quite small space for authenticity</b></p> <p>distancing of 'old story' allows clearer light to be shone on the universal - idea is to empathise and bring that back to the contemporary world</p> <p><b>"excessive freedom in the arts is a disaster"</b></p> <p>"a right small space where things are real, connected and organic"</p>
Librettist	<p><b>The Brechtian self-narrating device begets a naturalism in performance, liberating the notion of embodiment and enactment in an attempt to avoid kitsch.</b></p> <p>"Element of self-narration, in this instance, is intended to work like a hook to pull us in."</p> <p>The cultural specificity of the 12th Century story is framed self-consciously by the invention of angels with modern sensibilities.</p>
Repetiteur	<p><b>translation of real life into theatrical and musical articulation</b></p> <p>"naturalisme" in French</p> <p>deciphering the score as a map to expressing feelings</p> <p>importance of breadth of culture in approach to realism in music: <b>intellectual highs and emotive lows</b></p>
<i>Agnes</i> soprano, conductor	<p>playing opera more 'filmic' than 'larger than life' gestures - the lens is <b>in close up</b></p> <p>important to <b>identify</b> with and <b>understand</b> the character <b>emotionally</b> and <b>psychologically</b></p> <p>instincts and emotions drive people/character behaviour, identifiable as thoughts, but these are not necessarily, or often, rational</p>

**makes maps and graphic drawings to help with memorising music, then follows the process of incorporation**

production rehearsal is about incorporation

only able to sing out fully once there is confidence that emotional, technical and psychological aspects are understood and embodied

**embodied commitment comes with belief in rehearsal maps to hold meaning**

element of self-discovery through relationship with the music/score as her first love = a spiritual communion

communion in the rare level of attention afforded to the music

*The Protector*

baritone

**truthfulness of being myself in prepared performance**

blurring of person and persona = lost in role

**trust in a director to plug any gaps in own belief and mark out personal boundaries**

agreement or contract in which to perform as and discover myself; play begets eruptions from the unconscious

**realism achieved through mostly soft power of dialogue and play, occasionally hard power of set parameters and contractual terms**

problems arise when the contracts/contractual terms are not equal, or people are playing by different sets of rules

*Angel 1/ the Boy*

counter tenor

naturalistic environments/sets and costumes help vs unhelpful museum/abstract way of staging opera

**realistic story with understandable contexts**

to make people think and to move people is everything opera can hope to do

*Angel 2*

tenor

preparatory mapping, back history within stylistic parameters

**enough of a history I can behave naturally within**

**sincerity of intention** in terms of what trying to communicate = **subtext**

a good motive for everything you feel confident about doing

inspired emotionally as much as technically

***Not* style over substance**

*Angel 3*

realism = people really showing their emotions, telling a story with integrity

mezzo soprano	<p><b><i>Not</i> about a concept.</b></p> <p><b>strong relationships between characters and being believable and easy to understand</b></p> <p><i>Not</i> setting <i>Figaro</i> on the moon.</p>
Oboist	<p>importance of plausibility of story in order to play more convincingly</p> <p><b>belief in what you're doing</b></p> <p>respect the composer's wishes, as far as possible (by researching, studying and practising)</p> <p>realism = much harder than other approaches</p> <p><b>meaning behind every musical gesture, making meaning together</b></p> <p><b>dialogue with purpose to create together, transform self, deepen understanding and connection with others</b></p>
1st Violinist	<b>realism = connection between sense of responsibility, presence and experience of time</b>
2nd Violinist	<p>'awakeness' and openness to listen</p> <p><b>emotional responsibility and investment (also linked to preparation) linked with level of commitment and self-involvement</b></p> <p><b>connection = held in tension or dialectic between imaginative control and release of emotion in self-expression</b></p> <p><b>purpose of realism = to make new discoveries, giving of oneself and allowing others to give</b></p> <p>leads to quality, inspiration and connection</p>

**Production: ARIODANTE, Dutch National Opera and Canadian Opera Company 2016**

<b>PROFESSIONAL ROLE</b>	<b>WORKING DEFINITION (Extrapolated from interview transcripts)</b>
Harpsichordist	<p><b>"I don't understand the term 'realism', opera is always real and it's never real"</b></p> <p>"rehearsal is anti-realism, as soon as there is a stage and an audience there is an artistic performance, not an everyday performance"</p> <p>"opera rehearsals enable us to go deeper in our understanding by working with others on a piece, so you get a deep knowledge"</p> <p><b>language that describes what artists do ends up shaping how they do it, which is often difficult and constraining, particularly when it's not their own</b></p>



Actors/puppeteers

**"I've changed my entire view about understanding realism, lots of film and TV has influenced even puppetry"** (LK)

realism = naturalistic style, in real time, like in life, method acting, not possible/ varying degrees of possibility in opera because of singing (SM)

"the story is unreal, but the surface is: a surreal story told in a naturalistic way, like in Beckett" (SC)

**"Subtext** relates to the reason a director usually wants to do a particular piece" (KC)

**"Subtext in life is everything really. If anything, it's more important than what's being said because it's what you really mean.**

That doesn't mean to say that people don't communicate what they really mean but often the subtext is different to what's being said or what you really feel." (SM)

**Medium of representation/form has inherent qualities that 'shape' or frame subtextual content.**

**Magical nature of creative representation: bigger or smaller in scale than in real life.**

realism in puppetry = creating a relative lexicon, in correspondence with natural forces like time and gravity

= anthropomorphising inanimate objects, animating objects with naturalistic/mimetic human, animal, supernatural characteristics

different styles and approaches to puppetry, e.g. Bunraku (in *Ariodante*), motion capture in film turns humans into 'virtual puppets'

blurred lines between realism and self-mythologising in social media and reality TV

**aids being able to relate to something and be totally immersed in it; makes imagining easier, or you imagine less**

*Ariodante* (DNO)

mezzo soprano

**"I'm in the hands of the director. Whatever it is that I have to offer is their vision, whatever sense of realism is theirs."**

someone else's realism

"In disagreeing with another person's realism, can you still commit to it for them? Yes, yes, absolutely, because ultimately, I'm a player, not a diva, only when I'm tired.

The minute I set foot on stage I'm committed to what I've been told to do. End of story. I won't let my personal feelings come into it.

**It's a contract: either do it or go away and do something else."**

"You've got to connect and commit, otherwise you can't create, and that commitment opens up more possibilities."

Lighting Designer

**"The term realism doesn't compute. It isn't a term I would deal with. There's no such thing for me as abstract or realism."**

"People standing on a stage with their mouths open and other people watching them - there's nothing real about it!"

"It's a completely false situation."

Dramaturg (DNO)

**very often the term comes into the work in opera**

"Realism in opera is not realistic. You have always to find a translation of realistic elements and give them a shape, so realism on stage, for me, doesn't exist.

**It's always art, it's always an interpretation that is made, it's always shaped, it's always created."**

"You have a style which is very common now that I would call neo-realism. This is directors putting on a realistic setting, décor, set, using it in a realistic way, but invariably in a modern style. I call it neo-realism because it is a new reading, a new way and has modern means on the stage."

**"Puccini's *verismo* is about the truth, or true feelings, maybe a naturalistic setting but it's a made-up reality, an interpretation with realistic elements.**

I find 'realism' a difficult word."

**"The piece *as it is* doesn't exist. It's you reading it, it's me reading it, and maybe when we talk about it we come to a third possibility, but that is as it is for us now."**

"what's almost unique about opera is that you can have multiple voices simultaneously, meaning different things but in perfect compositional harmony or unity."

Stage Manager

"I think opera is realism. An opera can be 500 years old but still very actual. You can make the story being told and relate to various questions and situations, worldly things." So, opera is realism at its highest level."

"Lately, things have become either more realistic, more minimalistic, or more filmic with sets made with projections, because of the costs.

Sometimes the stage is just like a photograph and very real.

**Years ago, sets were more about form: big, simple shapes, and materials like iron and stone and glass. Now you see more real trees, real houses, real cars on stage.**

I think the technology can sometimes be too much and get you out of the story and there are real problems when things go wrong with it. Everything has to stop.

Less technology is often more."

Director

"You can't understand 'realism'. There's a lot of bollocks talked about it. There's no such thing as realism on the stage."

**"The only thing you can say is that psychological congruence is a more pretentious but possibly a better way of putting it.**

**Often, it's quite useful that visually things, characters and behaviour are psychologically congruent."**

"Good theatre takes you to a really primal place."

"The initial draw is poetic, and poetry usually is the realm of the unsaid or the implied and is much more interesting and something theatre is much more effective at."

**Production: Gianni Schicchi, Royal Opera House**

Assistant Director

"Realism, how I understand it, is about the credibility of the thoughts and feelings behind the conversations taking place in that environment."

"Truthfulness in performing with the imagination gives you a better contact between the performer and the audience.

If there isn't truth then you get a block in the communication, between the performer and the audience.

**"Realism is a process of and a belief in removing blocks to imaginative truth, to somehow marry imagination, playfulness and intellect.**

It's hugely important for performers and producers of the artform and for the audience

**that's how we unblock ourselves from not living in the moment and having truthful communication:**

a strong reaction, a thought, a feeling, a lucid moment of connection with a believable human experience."

"Now the credibility of how stories are told is changing. The styles and rhythms of life and how we represent it are changing."

## Chapter 4

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### **Case Study 1: *Ariodante***

#### **Summary:**

In this chapter, I build a case study around Richard Jones's twenty-first century production of Handel's eighteenth-century opera *Ariodante*,<sup>274</sup> employing mixed methods to map and analyse the production and its reception. I interrogate my own creative practice as revival director, employing two theoretical frameworks for my analysis: Deleuze and Guattari's notion of music and the map,<sup>275</sup> and Den Tandt's performative repositioning of realism as a blueprint for the production of contemporary cultural forms.<sup>276</sup>

I situate my experience with reference to the following: resources and materials created during the course of directing production revivals, my field notes and 'researcher reflections' made during rehearsal periods, interview transcripts and conversations with stakeholders in the production, as well as referring to published text and promotional images, reviews, articles and 'insight' material created around the production and its reception in four different cities and countries across two continents, over a period of four and half years. In the appendices, I provide further examples of working maps referred to in the body of the chapter, digital material created around the production, a synopsis of the opera *Ariodante* and my director's note on the production's approach to the staging, written for the programmes in Toronto and Chicago. My intention is for these to be read dialogically, to orient the reader towards my own perspective as a director and researcher/practitioner working towards a holistic appreciation of the operatic form.

I postulate that the processes involved in staging opera productions are 'dialogical cartographies': from interpreting the libretto, deciphering the score, and the conception of a design world through to negotiations with conductors and casts who embody them. Following Den Tandt's theory of the contemporary realist production of cultural forms, I read performances of opera productions as acts of faith in production maps to hold value and interpretive meaning, which are mediated by contractual parameters of reference and reality. Consequently, I position operatic performances as 'performed acts of orienteering' that reverberate beyond the space of the physical stage to occupy other virtual territories in digital broadcasts, 'insight' promotional material and recorded media.

I analyse how musical, visual and choreographic disciplines function dialogically in a contemporary realist mode, with reference to the way the production design combines actual and virtual elements. I further illustrate how musical and visual

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<sup>274</sup> The production was first created at the Aix en Provence Festival in 2014, where I was the assistant director. It has subsequently been revived at co-producing venues Dutch National Opera in Amsterdam and Canadian Opera Company in Toronto in 2016, and for Lyric Opera of Chicago in 2019. It has also been hired for presentation in Valencia in 2020.

<sup>275</sup> Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Eulenberg, 1976), p. 12.

<sup>276</sup> Den Tandt, C. *On Virtual Grounds: Blueprint for a Post-Mimetic Dialogical Realism*. (Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2015).

discourses in opera can be mutually shaping, indicating how spaces thus created extend beyond the stage to the reception of operatic performances, co-productions (in this case with Dutch National Opera, Canadian Opera Company and Lyric Opera of Chicago) and their avatars in the media.

I conclude the chapter with an assertion that the ‘truth’ of realism in performance is to be sought in the interplay of actual and virtual worlds and that opera as a form is uniquely positioned to do this, because of its dialogical richness and heightened idiom.

## Staging *Ariodante*

...it is entirely oriented towards an experiment with the real...open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation... The map has to do with performance...<sup>277</sup>

### **1 – Introduction**

Staging Handel's eighteenth-century opera *Ariodante* involves the making and navigation of various maps that are expedient to both process and performance. In this chapter, I shall employ the idea of the map to interrogate my own creative practice, as the associate director of Richard Jones's 2014 Aix-en-Provence Festival production for co-producers Dutch National Opera in 2016, and as revival director for Canadian Opera Company in 2016 and Lyric Opera of Chicago in 2019. In charting the development of this production across time and through its various incarnations with different companies and in different cities, I shall consider Christophe Den Tandt's recent theoretical 'blueprint' for the production of cultural forms *On Virtual Grounds* (2016), zooming in on an analysis of the opera's production staging, and broadening out to how contemporary 'operatic hermeneutics' produce spaces.

The map, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, takes many forms and has long been associated with many different notions of realism.<sup>278</sup> Maps are performative in both their form and purpose, asserting a particular 'experiment with the real' in why they are conceived and how they are then navigated and employed. I wish to qualify different maps as informing different phases in the process of staging opera. These perform distinct functions, such as focussing on detail relevant to certain roles within complementary disciplines and discourses, or '*socially constructed ways of knowing some aspect of reality*' which can be drawn upon when that aspect of reality has to be represented, or, to put it another way, *context-specific frameworks for making sense of*

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<sup>277</sup>Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F., *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Eulenberg, 1976), p. 12.

<sup>278</sup> My preferred definition of realism as a mode (rather than a genre or historical movement) was conceived of literature but is relevant to other cultural forms: 'An imaginative extension of experience along lines laid down by knowledge: referring to, reporting on, doing justice to, celebrating, analyzing and being constrained by reality, not [merely] replicating, mirroring, reproducing or copying it'. See Raymond Tallis, *In Defense of Realism*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1988), p. 195.

things'<sup>279</sup> Many kinds of interdisciplinary maps of meaning fall under this definition of discourse<sup>280</sup> and require particular knowledge and skill to decipher and interpret, for example: orchestral parts of an operatic score, a piano reduction vocal score, the *libretto* (or sung text), rehearsal schedule, design model box, technical drawings, rehearsal mark-out, costume and lighting plots, production book, video recording and even a review of a performance – all of which privilege certain information from a particular perspective and for a particular purpose, which can in turn be interpreted in a number of ways.

Auslander argues that music and its performance are inextricably imbricated with one another, intending his MAP to stand for music *as* performance, not an alloy of constituent disciplines (musicology and performance studies), but rather an ‘elemental, irreducible fusion of expressive means’.<sup>281</sup> I agree with this assertion, particularly when it comes to the heightened, multimodal reality of opera as a form, which sets out to communicate in performance through its own array of ‘expressive means’.<sup>282</sup> Tonal analysis, historical contextualisation and reception studies have indeed been slow to embrace the multimodal nature of opera as a visual and spatial as well as musical form of theatre.

The process of staging opera involves the collaborative and reflexive mapping of various discourses: from deciphering and interpreting the score to the realisation of a design world and negotiations with company members and casts who embody and navigate these musical, physical and conceptual spaces. I propose that in relation to the

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<sup>279</sup> Van Leeuwen, T., ‘Discourse as the recontextualization of social practice: A guide.’, in Wodak and Myer (eds) *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, second edition (London: Sage, 2009), p. 144. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>280</sup> ‘Discourse’ as a field of study is more broadly related to ‘culture’ and has been defined as: ‘distinctive ways of speaking/listening and often, too, writing/reading *coupled* with distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing, with other people and with various objects, tools, and technologies, so as to enact specific socially recognizable identities engaged in specifically recognised activities.’ J. P. Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 155.

<sup>281</sup> Auslander, P., Afterword: ‘Music as Performance: The Disciplinary Dilemma Revisited’ in Cook, Nicholas and Pettengill, Richard, *Taking It To The Bridge: Music As Performance*, (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2013) p.354-5.

<sup>282</sup> Opera is described on the Opera Europa website in the following way: ‘Opera is a total art form which joins music, singing, drama, poetry, plastic arts and sometimes dance. In each work, all the components of opera combine their expressiveness and their beauty. This complex alchemy makes an opera performance an extraordinary show, monopolising the sight, hearing, imagination and sensibility of the audience, where all human passions are at work.’ <http://www.opera-europa.org/en/opera-resources/what-is-opera>. Last accessed 10/7/2017.

making of opera productions it is useful to consider how dialogue and dialogical theories, developed from the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, might be understood as ‘thinking together’<sup>283</sup> about performance from different perspectives, in order to broaden and deepen understanding of the subject material (in this case opera) and reach some consensus (in this case a psychologically congruent, and hopefully coherent, production narrative). Christophe Den Tandt’s performative repositioning of realism ‘on virtual grounds’ has proffered a blueprint for the production of cultural works in a contemporary, or dialogical realist mode.<sup>284</sup> Whilst developed as a literary and cultural theory, I apply Den Tandt’s theoretical blueprint to my discussion of the form of opera in this case study, ‘staging *Ariodante*’. In so doing, I postulate that opera productions are increasingly dialogical cartographies of culture and can themselves be read as idiomatic maps. From the perspective of creative practice, I wish to advocate a dialogical model for the making and performing of opera, as well as asserting the richness of similarly dialogical and interdisciplinary approaches to scholarship and praxis.

Thus, in consideration of the production with reference to the way the set design for *Ariodante* combines actual and imaginary elements, I examine how visual and choreographic disciplines function in a dialogical realist mode. With reference to a technical video recording, I explore how audio and visual discourses in opera can be mutually shaping within a production in order to intensify its affective experience, as well as jarring, or going against one another to disrupt our perceptual flow of time and the production’s metanarrative. This can be intentionally deployed for narrative effect, as

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<sup>283</sup> Isaacs, W., *Dialogue and Art of Thinking Together: A Pioneering Approach to Communicating in Business and in Life* (Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group Inc., 1999).

<sup>284</sup> According to Christophe Den Tandt’s developing theoretical framework for cultural forms, ‘dialogical realism’ as a mode of discourse is firstly heuristic (fact-finding): investigative, researching and inter-medial in relation to our perceptual experience of the world. Secondly, it is reflexive (meta-discursive): e.g. through self-embedment (which in the context of opera, I understand to refer to the paradox of the simultaneous presence of the performer and their persona, as well as to a musical work and its interpretation), other examples of reflexivity include impersonation and pastiche. Thirdly, dialogical realism is contractual: implicit transactions make up the ‘referential contract’; performative negotiations make up the ‘reality contract’. Both must function simultaneously to support a psychologically congruent, or plausible lifeworld. This is messy and inherently problematic to dialogical approaches; however, it is often because of these discrepancies that realism claims to open up ‘an authentic search for truth’. Fourthly, dialogical realism is a mode in praxis (action-oriented): testing the limits of physical feasibility and the practical contingencies of situated-ness. Following the logic of the ‘reality bet’ (the optimistic belief that consensus can be reached), dialogical realism is a performative practice of looking more closely at what we know, reminding us of it and transforming that knowledge into experience. Extrapolated from chapter 7 of Den Tandt’s *On Virtual Grounds: Blueprint for a Post-Mimetic Dialogical Realism*.



breaking the imagined ‘reality contract’ in a Brechtian device of epic theatre,<sup>285</sup> or, more frequently betrays an unravelling of the immense artistic task of knitting all of opera’s component discourses and expressive means seamlessly together. None of this mapping, however, should be seen to diminish the considerable investment individuals make in navigating the live performance of a production’s metanarrative, which must be uniquely embodied and can be seen as an act of orienteering. The staging of operatic events, meanwhile, can be said to extend beyond their performances in venues to engage individuals, communities and heterotopias, or ‘other spaces’. This leads me to a consideration of opera’s meta-stages, ‘paratexts’,<sup>286</sup> avatars, reception and where any ‘truth’ in opera might exist.

## 2 – The ‘performing’ space

Screen shot from the beginning of Act II, DNO technical wide-shot video



<sup>285</sup> A familiar conventional example of this is the breaking of the ‘fourth wall’, where a performer steps out of a scene, or out of character, in order to address the audience directly.

<sup>286</sup> ‘Paratexts’ surround and extend the ‘text’, in this case an opera production, ‘precisely in order to present it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to make present, to ensure the text’s presence in the world, its reception’. Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, 8th edition (Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 1.

The set design, by ULTZ,<sup>287</sup> for the 2014 Aix-en-Provence production of *Ariodante* is an interior cross-section of a building, inspired by photographs of seventeenth-century buildings on Scottish Islands.<sup>288</sup> The entire set is framed within a white border, delineating the ‘fourth wall’. White lines on the floor continue along the back wall and ceiling and delineate the absent interior walls of the kitchen and bedroom. The kitchen door, which opens onto the main room, is signified by an off-white door handle mounted on a hinged bar fixed to the floor, which effectively simulates the action of opening and closing a door without the physical presence of an actual door, or door frame. This device is repeated on the other side of the main room in place of a door to the bedroom. (In this image of a screen shot from DNO’s technical fixed-camera recording, taken at the beginning of Act 2, the imagined kitchen door is open and the one to the bedroom is closed.)

The delineation of interior solid features, as an integrated design element, is intended to function dialogically with actual physical walls and doors and enables better sightlines across the set. The lines themselves perform as a haunting presence of objects removed from the actual building and also set up a readable convention for the imaginative space, providing the contractual terms of its integrity are observed by those inhabiting it (i.e. by not breaching imaginary walls or putting arms through imaginary doors and by ‘playing the space’ as if defined by walls and doors that are not actually present).

The design of imaginary architectural features enables the production to construct a level of simultaneous action across several contained spaces, where choreographed movement could be synchronized visually as well as musically, and is a development from relying solely on musical cues in closed-box sets for opera. Therefore, the conventions and potential for the *mise en scène* to construct a kind of ‘choreographed realism’ are built into the design.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> ULTZ is a well-known, self-named designer (and director). His name is an acronym standing for Unity, Love, Truth, and Zeal.

<sup>288</sup> Photographs of some of the sources of inspiration for the design were included in the original accompanying production programme in Aix. When the production was revived in Amsterdam and Toronto, the programme images varied and the set then elicited additional associated references in press reviews. The design process involves what Den Tandt calls ‘heuristic’, inter-medial investigation.

<sup>289</sup> This design feature became a point of interest for the marketing department at Canadian Opera Company (COC) in 2016, when I directed their revival of the production. A promotional ‘insights’ video

The mechanism of the door without a door asks for both the cast's and an audience's complicity in the imagined reality of the world it is portraying, or in Strindberg's words from his Preface to *Miss Julie*: 'Because the whole room and all its contents are not shown, there is a chance to guess at things – that is our imagination is stirred into complementing the vision.' This is, of course, not unique to opera, but one of many spatial design features in theatre tailored to invite an audience to participate in the imagining of the metanarrative, or world of the production: an example of how visual and conceptual interest are hopefully created, drawing curiosity into a space. I would also suggest that the multiple divisions in the spatial design of the set play to our twenty-first century literacy of the semiotics of the screen, and our capacity to read significance into simultaneity across multiple spaces. This resonates with the perception of simultaneous 'voices' and spaces possible in music through rhythm, melody, harmony and dissonance, and in opera in particular, where distinct simultaneous voices and text are frequently discernible.

Transposing the setting for the opera to a 1970s island in the Hebrides allowed for a number of artistic licenses to be imagined, forming some of its contractual terms of reference and reality, not least the notion of the community outsider. The spoiler of that community is Polinesso, a Duke in the libretto, re-imagined as a travelling charlatan priest in the production. The supposed saviour is Ariodante, Ginevra's fiancé from a neighbouring island and as such nominated to succeed Il Re as king. This offered a given context in which to explore the nature of deception, judgement, sacrifice and the resulting psychological fallout, rather than the traditional paradigm of redemption left open by the opera's ending. Polinesso capitalises on the good-natured suggestibility of the Calvinist island community and their adherence to a rigid ideology of morality and gender, which is exposed and harnessed for ill. In one respect, the setting of the narrative provides a map for the dynamics of competing discourses and ideologies as well as the subsequent psychological investigation of those characters that navigate them.

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for the production illustrates my rehearsal room interview with selected video clips from the staged production. Behind the Scenes of Ariodante, October 2016:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXbIUzIS98o&list=PL7KMuQtaRtozfCqPez2Ib6U78Cq3QubPh&index=22>

### 3 – Towards ‘dialogical realism’ in opera staging

I shall consider the production staging of Act 2, scenes 9 and 10, with reference to my own vocal score annotated with production blocking<sup>290</sup> and a fixed-camera video recording of a performance of the production in Amsterdam, made as a technical record of the show. The video was not made for broadcast purposes, although of better quality than most technical records of productions, with permission gratefully received for its reproduction with the courtesy of Dutch National Opera. Here I regard it as a record and map of how actual, physical elements of the set and props in the production design become vessels of imagined and symbolic meaning, through a combination of heightening shifts in style and register in the libretto, scoring, lighting and production choreography; all function dialogically to construct and propel the narrative towards psychological congruence, or dialogical realism.<sup>291</sup> In my reading of this staging, informed by my own creative practice in reviving the production, I shall show how design and choreographic features of visual discourses, such as in the use of puppetry, framing, stage pictures and the punctuation of movement in stillness, inform how we hear and experience the music of a staged opera, particularly in the treatment of repeats and Baroque musical structures, such as the *da capo* aria.<sup>292</sup> Audio and visual discourses, therefore, are mutually shaping and inform emotional and psychological engagement with operatic situations.

The scene begins at the pivotal moment towards the end of Act II when Il Re (the King) wrongly accuses his daughter Ginevra of immorality, and thus responsible for the death of her fiancé Ariodante, disgracing herself and the community (‘Non e mia figlia, una impudica’).<sup>293</sup> Il Re traverses the imaginary threshold to Ginevra’s bedroom (now established as real to the world on stage). The main room is left populated with a

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<sup>290</sup> Reproduced with the permission of the publisher from the Halle Handel Edition of *Ariodante* (BA4079-90) © 2007 Bärenreiter-Verlag Kassel and Aix-en-Provence Festival.

<sup>291</sup> A question persists about how much set is required in opera for there to be a believable environment in support of the metanarrative of the production, and perhaps distract enough from the technical mechanics of singing (increasingly exposed through camera close-ups), but this is beyond the scope of this chapter.

<sup>292</sup> A *da capo* aria is an accompanied song for solo voice with a musical structure of ABA, where the repeated A section is often embellished, ornamented and sometimes even improvised by the singer in a display of their virtuosity. The ornamentation of *da capo* arias together with any motivation and staging are, in my experience, a question of taste and negotiated in rehearsal between performers, conductor and director.

<sup>293</sup> My own literal translation: ‘Not my daughter, an immodest.’

community council still in shock from the news of Ariodante's sudden death in despair, as well as his brother Lurcanio's call for justice in accusing Ginevra, as being to blame. A secretly guilty Dalinda (Ginevra's confidante) and the misguidedly self-righteous Lurcanio are foregrounded in the main room. The audience crucially knows of Dalinda's guilt and Lurcanio's misdirected anger. The absent Polinesso has deceived Lurcanio, Dalinda, Il Re and Ariodante, precipitating these events. Watch the technical video recording of Act II, scenes 9 and 10:

**Vid.1:** Video excerpt of Act II, scenes 9 and 10





# Scene 9 from the Bärenreiter vocal score, with production blocking

*Apparato*

Scena IX  
RE, ODOARDO, GINEVRA e DALINDA

9. Szene  
KÖNIG, ODOARDO, GINEVRA und DALINDA

135

① Recitativo  
ODOARDO  
DALINDA  
GINEVRA  
RE

Quantu sven-tu-re un glorio sol ne por-tal  
All die-sen Unglück brach-te ein ein-ger Tag uns Herr, ach sehr Eu-re

②  
DALINDA

③ K → Gerdemann  
(s'alza con dispetto, a parte)  
(erhebt sich mit Verachtung und geht ab)

GINEVRA RE  
fat-ta di se ne-mi-ca. Pa-dre... Non è mia fi-glia u-na im-pu-di-ca.  
Schmerz hat sie ganz ver-än-dert. Va-ter... Die da ist scham-los, nicht mei-ne Toch-ter.

BA 8079-90

Od → table. G stands on bed, against wall.  
D angry to front of bed.  
② D changes to K.

Od  
K  
D  
G

G stands on bed, against wall. D trying to catch G, but calls out for help.

D: L 1  
→ K (3) → [?]  
K  
breath-taking note

## Scene 10, vocal score and blocking, part 1

136

Scena X  
GINEVRA e DALINDA

10. Szene  
GINEVRA und DALINDA

29. Accompagnato e Recitativo

GINEVRA  
DALINDA

A me im-pu-di-ca? (Oh! Ciel, che in-te-rit)  
Er nennt mich scham-los? (O Gott, was hier ist)

me? im-pu-di-ca? e per-chè? (Mi-se-ra fi-glia!) A  
mir? Ich sei scham-los? Und was-rum? (Weh mei-nem Er-ba-ten!) Das

④ K → Gerdemann  
DALINDA  
GINEVRA

me? a me im-pu-di-ca? Oh De-i Chi sei  
mir? Zu mir sagt er scham-los? O Him-mel! Wer hat

⑥ DALINDA

tu? Chi fu quel-li? E chi son i-o? (Chi-mé-de-li-ra)  
du? Wer war je-ner? Und wer bin ich? (Ha, sie ver-arr-ett sich)

BA 8079-90

*Pickup*

① G grabs od with table bed. ② G stands on bed.  
③ G stands on bed.  
④ K → Gerdemann  
⑤ G → Gerdemann  
⑥ D → Gerdemann  
⑦ G → Gerdemann

G grabs od with table bed. ② G stands on bed.  
③ G stands on bed.  
④ K → Gerdemann  
⑤ G → Gerdemann  
⑥ D → Gerdemann  
⑦ G → Gerdemann

# Scene 10, vocal score and blocking, part 2

The image shows a page from a musical score, specifically Scene 10, part 2. The left side contains the vocal score for Ginevra and Dalinda. The right side features handwritten blocking notes and diagrams. The notes include:

- ① Ginevra: "Ginevra stands on the bed. Disturbed out of unconsciousness by Lurcanio's denunciation of her, she has made it to her feet. Her innocence and moral purity are culturally signified through the vulnerability and whiteness of her costuming, skin tone and red hair; she is the only person in the production seen in undergarments and exposes more skin than anyone else. From an initially elevated position on the bed she retreats to the wall when accused of being 'una impudica' by her father, the attack endorsed by Lurcanio in the doorway. She challenges the accusation at arm's length to her father and king, who brandishes the damning evidence with an outstretched upstage arm that keeps the stage picture demonstrative, dynamic and open to an audience (on stage and in the auditorium), becoming a more intimate scene as Ginevra falls to her knees in an incredulous, vulnerable appeal at the foot end of the bed: interpreted by Lurcanio as 'proof' and testimony of witness to her 'immoral' conduct. The repetition and
- ② Ginevra: "Ginevra stands on the bed. Disturbed out of unconsciousness by Lurcanio's denunciation of her, she has made it to her feet. Her innocence and moral purity are culturally signified through the vulnerability and whiteness of her costuming, skin tone and red hair; she is the only person in the production seen in undergarments and exposes more skin than anyone else. From an initially elevated position on the bed she retreats to the wall when accused of being 'una impudica' by her father, the attack endorsed by Lurcanio in the doorway. She challenges the accusation at arm's length to her father and king, who brandishes the damning evidence with an outstretched upstage arm that keeps the stage picture demonstrative, dynamic and open to an audience (on stage and in the auditorium), becoming a more intimate scene as Ginevra falls to her knees in an incredulous, vulnerable appeal at the foot end of the bed: interpreted by Lurcanio as 'proof' and testimony of witness to her 'immoral' conduct. The repetition and
- ③ Ginevra: "Ginevra stands on the bed. Disturbed out of unconsciousness by Lurcanio's denunciation of her, she has made it to her feet. Her innocence and moral purity are culturally signified through the vulnerability and whiteness of her costuming, skin tone and red hair; she is the only person in the production seen in undergarments and exposes more skin than anyone else. From an initially elevated position on the bed she retreats to the wall when accused of being 'una impudica' by her father, the attack endorsed by Lurcanio in the doorway. She challenges the accusation at arm's length to her father and king, who brandishes the damning evidence with an outstretched upstage arm that keeps the stage picture demonstrative, dynamic and open to an audience (on stage and in the auditorium), becoming a more intimate scene as Ginevra falls to her knees in an incredulous, vulnerable appeal at the foot end of the bed: interpreted by Lurcanio as 'proof' and testimony of witness to her 'immoral' conduct. The repetition and

The diagrams show a stage layout with a bed, a wall, and a doorway. Ginevra is positioned on the bed, and Dalinda is positioned near the wall. The diagrams illustrate the blocking for the scene, showing the movement of the characters and the placement of the furniture.

Ginevra stands on the bed. Disturbed out of unconsciousness by Lurcanio's denunciation of her, she has made it to her feet. Her innocence and moral purity are culturally signified through the vulnerability and whiteness of her costuming, skin tone and red hair; she is the only person in the production seen in undergarments and exposes more skin than anyone else. From an initially elevated position on the bed she retreats to the wall when accused of being 'una impudica' by her father, the attack endorsed by Lurcanio in the doorway. She challenges the accusation at arm's length to her father and king, who brandishes the damning evidence with an outstretched upstage arm that keeps the stage picture demonstrative, dynamic and open to an audience (on stage and in the auditorium), becoming a more intimate scene as Ginevra falls to her knees in an incredulous, vulnerable appeal at the foot end of the bed: interpreted by Lurcanio as 'proof' and testimony of witness to her 'immoral' conduct. The repetition and

questioning of ‘A me impudica?’<sup>294</sup> turns to disbelief in the reality to which she has awoken in her text: ‘Chi sei tu? Chi fu quegli? E chi son io?’<sup>295</sup> The reality and promise of love, a morally pure and happy family life, indeed the whole atmosphere of joy and celebration at her engagement to Ariodante at the end of Act I has turned into a waking nightmare for Ginevra. Dynamically, this loaded scene between father and daughter is staged in the bedroom in profile to the fourth wall and, as such, references painterly treatments of mythical and religious subjects in its spatial composition and lighting, intensifying the dramatic moment of the King’s misguided denunciation of his daughter as a turning point in the opera.

The staging foregrounds Dalinda’s interjections of ‘(O ciel! Che intesi?)’, ‘Misera figlia!’ and ‘Oh Dei!’,<sup>296</sup> positioning her down stage centre in the adjacent room. Whilst Dalinda’s gaze is directed out to the audience and pierces the fourth wall, she remains anchored to the scene with the rest of the community by physical contact with the table in the main room. As a consequence of this dynamic tension in the direction of focus on stage, Dalinda comments dialogically and simultaneously on Ginevra’s misfortune, the implications for Il Re and the community, as well as her own shameful predicament: having impersonated Ginevra at her lover’s behest, she has precipitated Ginevra’s denunciation and accounts of Ariodante’s death. Dalinda’s text ‘(ohimè, delira.)’<sup>297</sup> is ambiguously bracketed as an aside in the libretto. In the staging it is delivered to Il Re, in an impotent attempt to deflect his fury and is loaded with dramatic irony; Dalinda was herself complicit in Ginevra’s drugging in a silent play at the beginning of Act II.

Dalinda’s text also sets up a transition that follows the brief image of innocent sacrifice, dismantled as Ginevra steps off the bed and passes into the main room, up onto the table for the heavily accented chords in the orchestra that signal a shift in the poetic and dramatic register of her text as she summons the Furies from Hades: ‘Uscite dalla reggia di Dite! Furie, che più tardate?’<sup>298</sup> The erupting orchestral fervour of the *accompagnato*<sup>299</sup> is liberally embellished in the pit in support of the staging of the text

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<sup>294</sup> ‘To me immodest?’

<sup>295</sup> ‘Who are you? Who was that? And who am I?’

<sup>296</sup> ‘(Oh Heavens! What intended?) Miserable daughter! ‘Oh Gods!’

<sup>297</sup> ‘Oh delirious!’

<sup>298</sup> ‘Get out of the palace of say! Rage, what more delay?’

<sup>299</sup> *accompagnato*, a form of *recitativo* with full orchestral accompaniment.



that follows: ‘Su, precipitate nell’Erebo profondo quanto d’amor voi ritrovate al mondo’.<sup>300</sup>

The register of the staging shifts with the move from *recitativo*,<sup>301</sup> which has been mainly naturalistic in performance style, to *accompagnato* and a flurry of more expressionistic stage action. The chorus members, who throughout the production form a community that bears witness to and endorses the wielding of moral judgment, move the table with Ginevra on it downstage, remove chairs from the main room and furiously tear down the wedding decorations that were joyfully erected across the four spaces of the set in Act I. The whole sequence completes in just moments (5 bars of music) disrupting our sense of naturalistic time. The chorus assemble upstage in a line across the back of the main room. Ginevra runs out on to the porch pursued by Dalinda over her appeal (‘Principessa!’)<sup>302</sup>, followed by Il Re who stops in the kitchen to watch the women, focussing the stage picture for a punctuating extended *fermata*<sup>303</sup> in the orchestra (at the end of bar 15). There is stillness and silence across the stage and in the pit – a picture – a moment in which to take in what has just happened. Out of this comes a chord, embellished with some artistic license in performance by the lute and strings to serve the dramatic pacing of the scene and change of mood. The chord signals Ginevra’s private questioning of space and meaning on the porch, in the wake of Ariodante’s death and accusation that she is to blame for it: ‘Dov’è? Ch’il sa me’l dica!.. Che importa a me, se il mio bel sole è morto?’<sup>304</sup> The meaning of this text and Ginevra’s position in the stage picture echo the staging of the ending of Ariodante’s famous aria ‘Scherza infida’, in which he bewails his beloved’s (supposed) infidelity and is the last an audience has seen or heard from him.

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<sup>300</sup> ‘Up, hurl into Hell’s depths all of love you can find in the world’

<sup>301</sup> *recitativo*, or ‘recitative’ in English, is a style of delivery in which a singer adopts the rhythms of ordinary speech and ranges from *secco*, or ‘dry’, at one of a spectrum where the singer is accompanied with minimal plucked or fretted instruments (standardised at the time of Handel as a harpsichord and viol or violoncello), through to *accompagnato*, *obbligato* or *stromentato* at the other where the full orchestra is employed as an accompanying body and where sung ordinary speech bridges into something more song-like. This latter form is often used, as in this case, to underscore a particularly dramatic text.

<sup>302</sup> ‘Princess!’

<sup>303</sup> a *fermata*, or pause, is a symbol of musical notation indicating that a note or rest should be prolonged beyond the note value would normally indicate. Here it is not printed in the score. I have added it in pencil (as would the conductor in his score) during the course of production rehearsals. As it occurs during *recitativo* there is more artistic licence taken over pauses and the orchestra is held until the desired stage action is completed.

<sup>304</sup> ‘Where is he? Who knows how to tell me! What does it matter to me, if my beautiful sun is dead?’

The violence in the text and orchestral *accompagnato* finds metaphorical expression through a disruption to the temporal flow of the narrative, whilst remaining within the aesthetic and space of the production's own realist terms: the community scatters to tear down the heart-shaped decorations and reconfigure the furniture in the main room. This spatial reconfiguring shifts the aesthetic from the relative naturalism of the recitatives to a heightened expressionistic space in which to stage Ginevra's aria 'Il mio crudel martoro crescer non può di più'.<sup>305</sup> The video excerpt finishes there.

Although the transition between sequences described above occurs quickly in performance, detailed maps of the flight paths of cast and props are developed in rehearsal to achieve these scenic modulations safely and at the desired temperature and speed for dramatic momentum. The community's gaze and the staging of the aria that follows focus on Ginevra, whose movements quietly resonate with visual references to the Crucifixion story in part A, reminiscent of the choreographic language of Pina Bausch; in the B section, the staging echoes Ariodante's own position of despair on the floor against the front door in 'Scherza infida', further emphasising their spiritual connection, and in the *da capo* section of the aria,<sup>306</sup> she is dragged by Il Re (the King) from the kitchen floor across the main room and onto the table, where she is metaphorically sacrificed.

This heightened idiomatic staging has been progressively signalled and operates dialogically with Ginevra's text, music and the sub-textual world that has been constructed to support it. The culmination of the stylistic modulation is a meta-theatrical puppet show (titled 'Sin City' in rehearsal) in which the community morally pass judgment and denounce Ginevra at the end of Act II, during the opera's orchestral 'dances'. Puppetry, as a metatheatrical narrative device, is also used during the dances at the end of Act I where the community presents a surprise puppet show finale to the celebrations that are staged to mark Ariodante and Ginevra's engagement, with puppet-size replicas of the singers and significant props featured during the action of Act 1. The community performs an endearing backstory of how Ariodante and Ginevra met, projecting an innocent vision of a happy family life to come, under the banner of the

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<sup>305</sup> 'This cruel anguish could not be greater.'

<sup>306</sup> *da capo*, meaning 'from the head, or beginning' here refers to the repeated section of a *da capo* aria, with a musical structure of ABA.

Good Book. This first celebratory puppet show is reprised, under the blundering attempts of the King at the end of Act III to smooth over the atrocities that have happened and reunite Ariodante and Ginevra in marriage, becoming an expression of ideological intransigence in the King and community, illuminating the oppression and suffering caused by religious dogma, among other things. Ginevra abandons the charade, rejecting both Ariodante and the island community in the production's significantly 'modern' solution to staging the opera's 'happy' ending.

'Sin City' Puppet sequence – screen shot from the 'zoom' technical video DNO.



How the story of *Ariodante* is told in the production, how an audience is invited to be imaginatively complicit and emotionally involved in the telling, forms a significant part of the contractual basis of reference and reality, or imaginative truth of the world of the production. The level of willingness of an audience's suspension of disbelief can only be 'bet' upon (to use Den Tandt's terminology) by stakeholders in a production through committing to what *they* can believe in and by participating in dialogical processes in both visual and musical languages.

Deleuze and Guattari conceive of music as being rhizomatic<sup>307</sup> in the way it ‘has always sent out lines of flight’.<sup>308</sup> Conflating the two analogies of rhizome and map, they conceive of connecting strata and dimensions of space that we experience as real but that are not always actual; space includes that experienced in the mind, suggested, unfolded or created by what we perceive, feel and imagine: the augmented actual, the virtual and the transcendent.<sup>309</sup> Modulations in the musical and visual register culminate in the puppetry sequences as ‘virtual’ to the reality of the on-stage community in this production of *Ariodante*. They are staged as the imaginative expression of that community’s joys, hopes and fears at various points in the opera’s story. Similarly, as for the on-stage world, visual and musical ‘lines of flight’ traverse our own personal narratives as makers and audiences. It is at these intersections that we experience something meaningful, something real to us in our encounter with the performance of music. Visual information and contexts have been shown to influence what we hear in music at both cognitive and perceptual levels.<sup>310</sup> Indeed, our other senses influence our experience and interpretation of sound and vice versa.<sup>311</sup> Whilst music is shaped and spaced in time, it arguably shapes our sense of time and space, or temporality, connecting our sense of the present place to sounds and ideas from elsewhere, the past and even to notions of the future.<sup>312</sup>

A significant operatic feature is the possibility of a congruent ‘assemblage’ of multiple, simultaneous voices and spaces within which cultural values are more or less cogently expressed and nuanced. Within this production, the metadiscursive puppet shows during the ‘dances’ at the end of each act are examples of Den Tandt’s

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<sup>307</sup> A rhizome is a continuously growing horizontal underground stem, which puts out lateral shoots and adventitious roots at intervals. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, it is explored as a metaphor for the way networks of connections and meaning may be conceived, in contrast to the structural and metaphorical hierarchy of the tree.

<sup>308</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 11.

<sup>309</sup> Two fascinating volumes inform my own understanding of Deleuze and Guattari’s analogy here: *Deleuze and Space*, Ed by Buchanan, I. and Lambert, G. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005) and *Deleuze and Music*, Ed by Buchanan, I. and Swiboda, M. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

<sup>310</sup> Schutz, M., ‘Seeing Music? What Musicians Need to Know About Vision,’ *Empirical Musicology Review* 3, no. 3: 2008, p.91

<sup>311</sup> See the work of Professor Charles Spence and Crossmodal Research Laboratory in experimental psychology at <https://www.psy.ox.ac.uk/team/charles-spence> or a more light-hearted article at <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2012/oct/22/sound-and-smell-create-harmony>. Last accessed 10/07/2017.

<sup>312</sup> Kramer, J., *The Time of Music: New Meanings, New Temporalities, New Listening Strategies* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1988).

performative dialogical realism that imaginatively express and shape the reality of the community that create them. We can see this relationship reach beyond the world of the production to reference actual spaces in the cities where the production was performed. The Act II ‘Sin City’ puppet sequence, for example, took on particular resonance when the production was performed in Amsterdam at DNO, not far from the city’s famous red light district.

Positioning opera productions within a discourse of staged ‘events’ that necessarily take in time, place and the demographic of performers and audiences allows for a compelling expression of culture. Such territory in the twenty-first century is arguably becoming increasingly virtual, reaching well beyond the confines of actual space through the way contemporary performances enact affective interrogations. Such events, of course, do not exist in a void.

Within the realm of ideas and the discipline of critical theory, for example, conceptualised methods such as Jameson’s cognitive mapping and theorising the existence of a geopolitical unconscious consider the broader socio-political situation and contexts of the production of cultural works, in an effort to identify the unseen social forces that shape events and cultures.<sup>313</sup> Such strategies position cultural works and performance events as portals to uncovering dialectic forces that shape them, such as narrative and affect, in the case of Jameson’s definition of realism as a mode of production, or the workings of ideology and utopia that inform different perspectives on the telling of history. Within the ‘container’ of the production, the way the same puppetry sequence is used in this staging of *Ariodante* at the end of Act I (as a joyful community celebration) and Act III (where a variation of the same staging is experienced by Ginevra as an act of oppression), is an example of how cultural performances are also social actions that influence the reality of those involved or excluded; moreover, through being imaginatively complicit, such performances confront audiences on their own sexual and religious politics.

In reading Jameson’s theories alongside reviving the *Ariodante* production I have become more conscious of its Brechtian features and their potential to locate reification,

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<sup>313</sup> I discuss Jameson’s conceptual formulations and how they have informed my own work in chapter 2 on ‘Theory and Method’.

such as: the use of surtitles as ‘oppressive’ Old Testament bible quotation captions during the overture; on-stage scenic captions in the puppetry sequences that signal hegemonic oppression masquerading as a naïve form of wholesome piety; breaking the fourth wall within a scene operatically (as Dalinda does in the example I have chosen to detail above, combining Baroque performance conventions with more naturalistic ones); towards the end of the production Ginevra exits the island community by stepping off the raised stage onto the forestage and out of the framed world of the set. The latter *coup de théâtre* inverts the power relationship depicted in the ‘Sin City’ puppet sequence (performed by the ‘wholesome’ chorus community) where Ginevra’s puppet double hitchhikes to a life of pole-dancing iniquity, humiliating Ginevra at the end of Part II. At the end of Part III, whilst the community reprise the celebratory wedding puppet show as if nothing has happened, it is the patriarchy and community that are revealed to behave immorally and Ginevra reclaims control of her own life, by hitching for a ride off the island.

#### **4 – Towards ‘dialogical performance’**

Singers, music staff, conductors and directors ideally arrive at production rehearsals ‘knowing’ the score to the best of their ability: what everyone is voicing in the libretto, in whatever language they are singing, as well as having a personal understanding of what it means to them. Increasingly important are the skills necessary to explore the group’s understanding and expression of character, phrasing and subtext, together with others in their roles through rehearsals. For singers, this becomes about embodiment: assimilating, through a process of layering of information, the discursively mapped role into the voice, thought and emotional architecture, movement and relationships in scenes. This is an extraordinary feat of orienteering when accomplished successfully and considering the climate and constraints of international opera productions.<sup>314</sup>

Crucially, mapping and navigation also exist on the level of programming repertoire, detailing and deploying the producing company’s resources, such as the

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<sup>314</sup> In accord with my own view, another form of recent sector mapping has endorsed the holistic training of opera singers in the UK (where acting, physical training and command of languages are not merely add-ons to vocal performance) to meet the growing demands of the profession. See Graham Devlin Associates’ 2016 study, commissioned by National Opera Studio, for the full report: [http://www.nationaloperastudio.org.uk/uploads/1/3/7/8/13783108/opera\\_training\\_for\\_singers\\_in\\_the\\_uk\\_september\\_2016.pdf](http://www.nationaloperastudio.org.uk/uploads/1/3/7/8/13783108/opera_training_for_singers_in_the_uk_september_2016.pdf) last accessed 10/7/2017.

availability of casts and staff members, rehearsal spaces, orchestra and chorus sessions, costume fittings, stage time, and so forth, in the form of the technical and rehearsal schedule. It is beyond the scope and expedience of this study to unpack just how important, unseen, and political the power struggles over this territory can be; however, in my experience, many of the most critical and diplomatic negotiations occupy these planning spaces and determine the relative dialogical success of opera productions.

On the level of the metanarrative (world of the production), the director hopefully mediates the various maps towards some consensus (generally in the interest of coherence, but sometimes intentionally not). This will include character motivations for flight paths through actual and imagined elements of the set, recorded as ‘blocking’. Meanwhile, the conductor and director exert their influence over other stakeholders in the production, hopefully but by no means consistently, towards the same end. This can be messy, difficult, combative and wonderful. Diplomatically speaking, practitioners have a certain amount of agency within their defined professional and character roles, whereas personalities understandably manifest variously under pressure.

Opera rehearsals, in my opinion, should be about human beings navigating the musical and associated territories, about negotiation and discovery. These are led at various phases in the schedule by different roles. Crucially, they involve an act of faith in the process to generate a set of choices for staging opera that are plausible to the group of people assembled, resulting in the creation of a cohesive metanarrative, mapped in turn in the form of the production book. I would therefore agree, in theory, with Den Tandt’s insistence on an open mind and faith in dialogical processes to reach consensus, although must stress that in practice this manifests in participants in varying degrees under the pressures of time and within the constraints of available resources. Investigating the given material of the score and libretto from a number of different perspectives dialogically, when entered into in this way can, in my experience, lead to greater communion with the music, oneself and others whilst encouraging a sense of purpose and commitment to a shared ‘imaginative truth’ for those involved. Therefore, counter to what one might instinctively believe about the heightened form of opera, staged productions can be made following the blueprint of a dialogical realist discourse, but crucially require an act of faith in the process, and a clarity and acceptance of contractual

terms, whether they hope to reference a naturalistic, expressionistic and/or other aesthetic.

This latter point, regarding a production's artistic prerogative to create an imagined or virtual element of its 'reality' contract, is a major point of contention not only for new cast members in revivals, but with regards to audiences and in an opera production's reception in the media. Whether it is a new production or a revival, how the metanarrative is embodied or 'bought into' by cast members and how it is 'received' by audiences is always a gamble, relating to Den Tandt's 'reality bet'. Nevertheless, from the perspective of those performing in and producing opera productions, it is my view that live performances of opera be seen as acts of cultural orienteering and faith in production maps to hold value and interpretive meaning.

## **5 – Return as a musical and production conceit**

The following example is adapted from my field notes whilst directing the revival for Canadian Opera Company in 2016, after working as associate director on its first revival in Amsterdam for Dutch National Opera where the original director, Richard Jones, was present for the stage rehearsals. I have used a technical wide-shot video of the dress rehearsal from DNO as a record of the production to illustrate my analysis of how opera productions frame space, and now make reference to a close-up 'zoom' format recording of the same performance to illustrate working process, methods and my reading of them. For the purposes of this example in isolation, it is worth restating the convention of how internal doors are suggested within the set by a door handle mechanism that signifies the opening and closing of 'imagined' doors, and that internal walls are delineated by white lines on the floor, back wall and ceiling of the enclosed set. Sarah Connolly performs the role of Ariodante, and Annette Frisch performs the role of Ginevra in the video example.

The style and directorial approach of the production is deliberately melancholic and intense, in the vein of the psychological realism of a play by Strindberg or Ibsen. The Baroque formal structure of *recitativo* and *da capo* aria under this approach becomes a framework for the psychological development of characters, so that each musical section



emerges in narrative progression, allowing for a motivational excavation of tonal features, *ritornelli*, repeats, *coloratura* ornamentations and *cadenzas*.<sup>315</sup>

In the co-production revival in Toronto, staging ‘real time thinking’<sup>316</sup> across musical repeats in an existing production presented a challenging task for new cast members, especially Alice Coote, who was taking over from Sarah Connolly in the title role. Alice had sung the role in other productions (as had Sarah Connolly) and had her own, often very different and visceral understanding of how to perform the character. We needed to work together on ‘rediscovering’ reference points and character associations that she could find plausible in this new configuration, anchoring thoughts and more abstract ideas within the physical space of the set for each musical figure and section.

We (re-)created a movement vocabulary specific to Alice’s body through the space that was specific to it, which also honoured musical and visual production ideas. The combination of thoughts and choreography, based on the production map, featured visual reminiscences, rhymes, and ‘ghosts’ or hauntings of scenic space. This production idea unfolds from the potentialities within the design of the set, already mapped out in my discussion of the ‘performing space’. The character Ariodante, in particular in this production, undergoes perceptual and interpretative changes to the events of Act I in Acts II and III; the same stage blocking is echoed at different times, in the light of the unfolding plot. With different knowledge at such junctures, Ariodante must repeatedly reinterpret the events in which he took part or to which he bore witness. Thus, the same blocking is invested with different meaning at different times in the opera through choreographic rhyme (as Ariodante retraces his steps) and visual reminiscence (from the audience’s perspective). The following is an example of this work from the production that then tracks Ariodante’s psychological journey and experience of reality through the opera. The visual grammar and choreographic use of rhymes in the production were conceived to work alongside the Baroque musical features already listed above, and in

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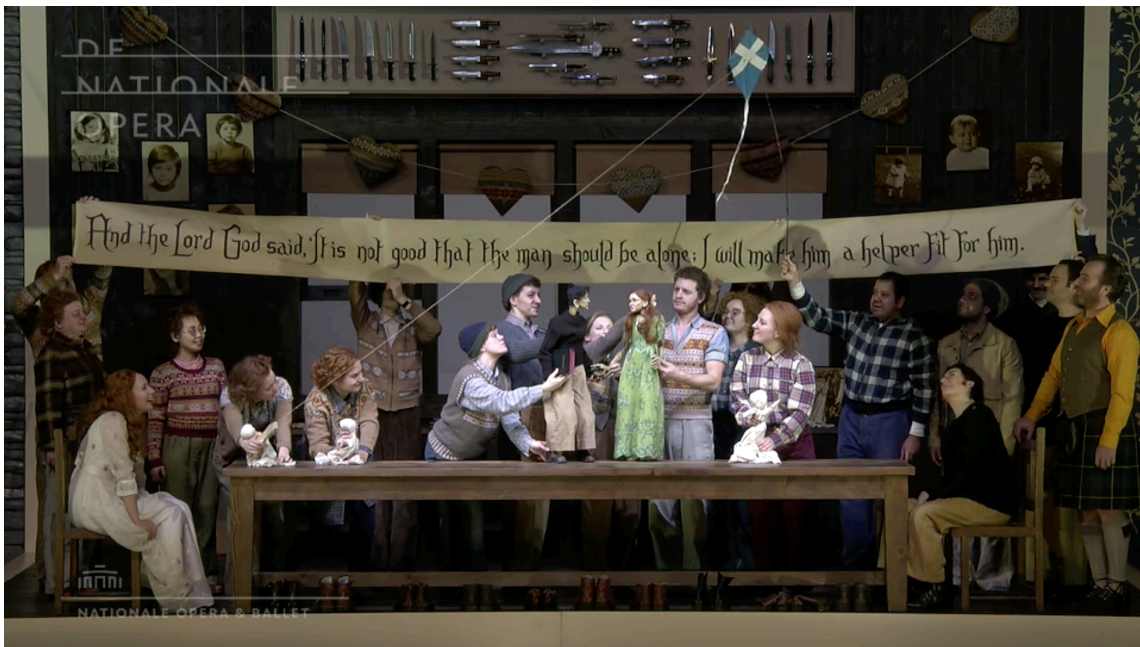
<sup>315</sup> *ritornelli*, in this context, are orchestral passages between verses or sung phrases of an *aria*, or song; *coloratura* literally means ‘colouring’ and in baroque music refers to a technique of singing that requires florid musical runs, trills and wide interval leaps; *cadenzas* in baroque singing are improvised or written out ornamental passages allowing virtuosic display, generally occurring over the penultimate note of an important subsection or end of an *aria*, or duet.

<sup>316</sup> By this I mean to refer to ‘units of thought’ that translate into staged action, following Stanislavskian techniques, where the amount of time it takes for a character to believably think and act on thoughts as they might occur in a naturalistic way, and in response to a situation, need to be plotted alongside the score.

phrase structure, rhythms, repeats and vocal embellishments to invite a meditation on the opera's themes, and their relevance to performers and audiences.

During the overture, in a contemporary Brechtian interface with the public, the surtitles are used to project passages of Old Testament text (deliberately chosen for their 'misogyny' from the perspective of contemporary gender politics) that accompany a choreographed sermon, thus establishing the onstage community and setting on a remote Scottish Island in the 1970s. The font of the surtitles was chosen to suggest Old Testament quotations, later 'echoed' on stage in the banner that is unfurled for the culminating picture of the puppet show. The infiltration into the island community of Polinesso, cast as an ill-intentioned visiting Preacher in this production, threatens the seeming innocence and order brought about by an ideologically unquestioned religious framework to the island community.

Screenshot of Act I finale: 'happy' puppet show.



Dancing and the heartfelt celebratory puppet show follow Ariodante's recitative '*Pare, ovunque mi aggiri, che incontrerò gaudio e brio*' (It seems wherever I turn, that I find joy and animation) and the event of Ginevra's appearance in her wedding dress for

the finale of Act I. In Act II the joy and truth of Ariodante's experience is then brought into question, through the insinuation that Ginevra is Polinesso's lover, in the recitative at the beginning of scene 2 that launches Ariodante's aria 'Tu preparati a morire'. Ariodante is then witness to a duplicity in the following recitative where Polinesso greets Dalinda dressed as Ginevra, as part of an unwitting sexual game, in a choreographic echo of the moment in Act I when Ariodante greeted Ginevra in her wedding dress ('Ginevra? / Oh mio Signore!').

**Vid.2:** Video clip of recitative and 'wedding dress' greeting.



**Vid.3:** Video clip of ‘Ariodante’s deception’.



Lurcanio’s intervention – in which he prevents Ariodante from taking his own life and acting impetuously – fails to get through to Ariodante, who, believing his bride to be unfaithful, progressively retreats from the site of these events, his psychological devastation staged progressively across the main room, kitchen and porch areas through the three respective musical sections (AB *da capo*) of the opera’s central aria ‘Scherza infida’.

Whilst the set performs acoustically extremely well, emptied of people and action it also serves as a visual echo chamber and signals the loss of joy and undoing of innocence, as Ariodante remembers and locates in the space where happier but now sullied memories were created in Act I. The following video clip is of Sarah Connolly’s performance of the aria, which is built on thought changes that trigger emotions occurring with harmonic shifts in the orchestration as well as sung text, *melisma* and vocal ornamentations.<sup>317</sup> With no other visual ‘distractions’ the audience’s focus is solely on the singer and their ability to tell a story through embodying the music. The significance of the staging, however, draws on the memory of what the audience has already witnessed

<sup>317</sup> *Melisma* is an expressive vocal phrase or passage consisting of several notes sung to one syllable.

occupying and animating the space for its dramatic context, supported by shifts in how the set is lit.

**Vid.4:** Video clip of ‘Scherza infida’



On his miraculous but lamentable return to the island in Act III, Ariodante revisits, decodes and reinterprets the deception event with fresh knowledge garnered from Dalinda (that it was her, dressed as Ginevra he witnessed with the imposter Polinesso) in their recitative before his next big aria ‘Cieca notte’. In this complex scene, which is staged with Ariodante in the central room as a physical duet with Dalinda, Ariodante’s experience of the ‘ghosts’ of the events in acts I and II becomes increasingly investigative and heuristic; throughout sections A and B, Ariodante’s outrage, suffering and incredulity lead to uncovering the metonymic significance of the bible in the main room as the means of deceiving the community, signalled as the point of focus throughout the *da capo* section of the aria. Dalinda also embodies echoes of the physical blocking from earlier scenes, such as Polinesso’s duplicitous comforting of Ariodante in the B section of ‘Tu preparati a morire’; only Dalinda’s sympathy for Ariodante is now genuine and full of remorse in ‘Cieca notte’.



Meanwhile, juxtaposed in the adjacent bedroom, a simultaneous mock-exorcism of Ginevra is staged as the embodiment of Polinesso's exploitative charlatanism that succeeds in brazenly manipulating a community's fears. The community is both blind to and complicit in the actual damage being inflicted; re-casting Ginevra as hysterical and possessed by the devil legitimises Polinesso's opportunistic groping of her, as the King and community clutch their bibles.

Screen shot of 'Cieca notte'



Polinesso eventually gets his comeuppance, but the critique of a dour Calvinist discourse around the Fall, sacrifice and redemption permeates the production. In Toronto, the staging of Ariodante's aria 'Dopo notte' evolved from Sarah Connolly's 'ecstatic' characterisation through rehearsals with Alice Coote, anchoring Ariodante's psychological progression in the space, communicating his decoding of the meaning of objects within it to the community of onlookers. We took this path through the scene possibly because Alice was really struggling to embody certain aspects of the production's very particular reading of the piece in the absence of the original director, along with dealing with huge emotional stress in her personal life; however, the results

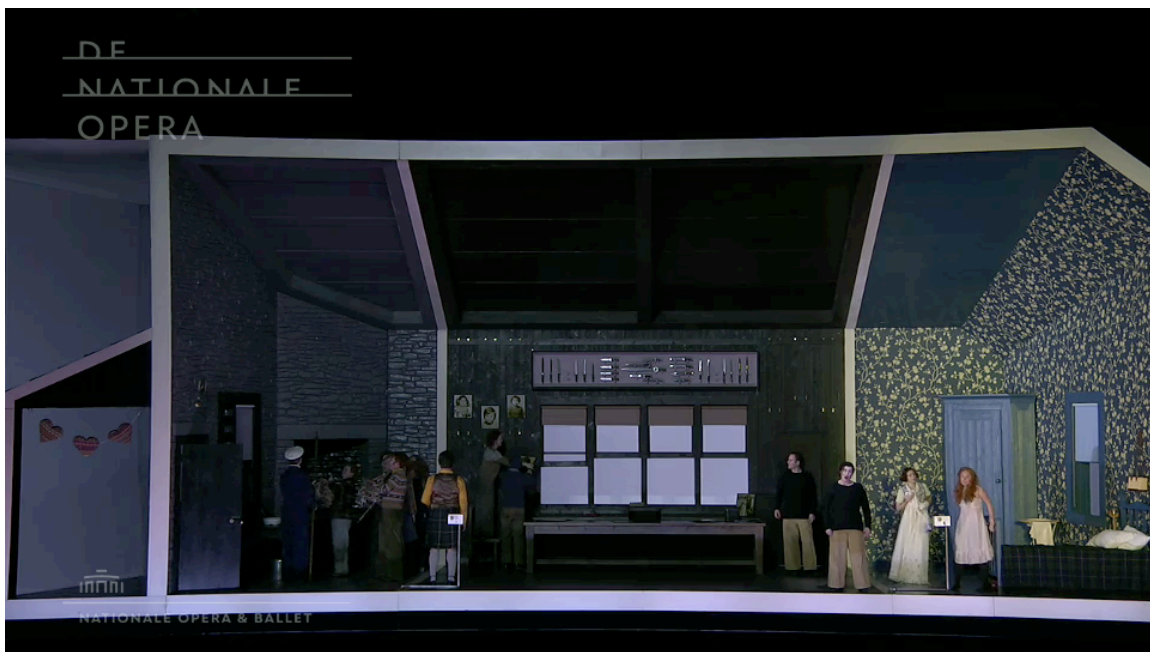
were compelling and gave Alice a visceral framework for what at this point in the evening is a monumental task vocally and emotionally for any singer of the role. The additional blocking created is a practical example of how ideas *constellate* around objects to form a realist narrative, or how Ariodante makes sense of his surroundings and feelings in the moment. They were added to the production book and adapted for the revival in Chicago, which developed the idea further.

During the staging of ‘Dopo notte’ in Toronto, the photograph of Ginevra on the wall as an innocent child – that Polinesso had corrupted in Ariodante’s mind and the King had taken off the wall to caress with lamenting nostalgia after the public disgrace of his daughter in his aria (no. 38) ‘Al sen ti stringo, e parto’ (I embrace you and depart) – is taken up anew; the purity of the libelled image is now restored in Ariodante’s mind, whilst the community is reminded of what they have put Ginevra through (unbeknownst to Ariodante) as they and the rest of the principal characters experience shame. The stack of bibles upon which Polinesso rests his chin during the same King’s aria (no. 38) is toppled and scattered in the *da capo* of ‘Dopo notte’, in Ariodante’s attempt to communicate the folly of religious dogma to the community. Working together, Alice and I also ‘discovered’ space for a final ‘transcendent’ moment of forgiveness between Ariodante and Dalinda that ties up an otherwise loose narrative thread in their relationship. During the ‘B’ section of the aria, Dalinda burns the dead Polinesso’s clothes in the kitchen, whilst during the playout of the aria, in Chicago, we restaged the scene so that Ariodante unites Dalinda and Lurcanio before following the community into Ginevra’s bedroom, tying up the tentatively redemptive subplot, as their duet was one of the casualties of cuts that needed to be made in Chicago. The tragedy of this trajectory for Ariodante is precisely that he has not witnessed and has no knowledge of just how shamed and exploited symbolically Ginevra has been.

Following ‘Dopo notte’, Ginevra is confronted all at once with the miraculous return of her ‘dead’ fiancé, apologies from her father the King, Lurcanio her accuser and Dalinda, her duplicitous confidante. The production plays out to its psychological conclusion within a broader social narrative that details devastating individual casualties and denial within the patriarchy, with a final act of female liberation and rejection of the atrocities caused by men, desire and unyielding religious dogma. In the end, whilst the

community attempt to recreate the celebrations of Act I, as if all can simply be forgotten because the two lovers are ‘reunited’, Ginevra’s dismay, objection and finally packing her suitcase to leave the island – by breaking the fourth wall and stepping out of the set – is a Brechtian theatrical coup, recognised in the press (already quoted) as a ‘postmodern’ solution to resolving a morally ‘problematic’ end to the opera. Ariodante is left numbed, bereft and impotent in the wake of Ginevra breaching the frame of island kingdom.

**Vid.5:** Video clip of the last scene.



## **6 – Beyond the physical stage**

Performances of opera reverberate beyond the space of the physical stage to occupy other virtual territories through their paratexts in programme notes and avatars in digital broadcasts, DVDs, marketing show reels, ‘insight’ promotional material, on social and other recorded media, such as YouTube or the technical video made by DNO used in this case study. The reception of these performances and their virtual reincarnations continues the process of interpretation and intersection of individual narratives (that we each bring to the event) with the metanarrative of the opera production, igniting further interplay between actual and virtual worlds, be it by an audience in a venue on the night, in the



press, on television, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, or other virtual presence. The more intersections of personal narrative with the metanarrative there are, the greater the chance of connection between them, following the ‘reality bet’. The physical touring and international co-productions of opera, often ‘revived’ with new company and cast members, create further cultural ripples in their spatio-temporal conjunctions with new audiences.

In the midst of the well-documented and debated circumstances of the opening night of *Ariodante* in Aix-en-Provence in 2014,<sup>318</sup> where it was targeted for disturbance and sabotage amidst national demonstrations on behalf of the *intermittents de spectacle* in France, a large portion of the metanarrative, such as the use of puppetry and Polinesso’s disguise of religious authority in the production, was picked up and commented upon in the press. The publicity and marketing departments’ involvement, wherever a production is presented, add another level of discourse that clearly steers, frames and inflects the space of any production’s reception.<sup>319</sup> Marketing strategies open up other debates and ‘lines of flight’ around engagement and impact.<sup>320</sup>

Reviewers that were sympathetic towards Richard Jones’s production of *Ariodante* in Toronto, when I directed it for Canadian Opera Company in 2016, focussed on local resonances with the island setting and *how* the story was told, citing its use of puppetry, choreography, ‘postmodern’ treatment and ending (informed through direct relationships with the company’s public and media relations department, interviews with the production team, the conductor and members of the cast). For example, where the ‘Sin City’ puppet sequence at the end of Act II was particularly noted and enjoyed by company members in the Netherlands as referencing Amsterdam’s neighbouring red light district; in Toronto, the same was described salaciously in the press for sensationalism

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<sup>318</sup> Whilst there is much to say on this subject, it is unfortunately outside the scope of this chapter. Sarah Connolly, who sang the title role in both Aix and Amsterdam, wrote her own vivid account of the evening of the first performance for the theartsdesk: <http://www.theartsdesk.com/opera/nightmare-aix-sarah-connolly-shocking-first-night> last accessed 10/7/2017.

<sup>319</sup> See the *Globe and Mail*’s preview article by Robert Harris subsequent to separate interviews with me and the conductor, Johannes Debus, as an example of an informed and sympathetic framing of the production in Toronto: <https://beta.theglobeandmail.com/arts/theatre-and-performance/coc-brings-handels-ariodante-to-1960s-scotland/article32361072/?ref=http://www.theglobeandmail.com&>

<sup>320</sup> For relevant recent marketing material on ‘culture segments’ and the mapping of audiences’ receptiveness to and engagement with arts and heritage sectors see: <http://mhminsight.com/articles/culture-segments-1179> last accessed 10/7/2017.

and to generate controversy, or an overall parallel was drawn between the production's metanarrative and the communities and culture of the Canadian Maritimes.<sup>321</sup> Just how much resonated with the thousands of audience members in each of the co-producing venues forms part of Ten Dandt's 'reality bet' and remains resistant to measurement and codification, beyond the scale of the applause, polling audience's immediate reactions or studies that have attempted to measure the longer term impact of the arts in general.<sup>322</sup>

Negative, reactionary reviews typically aimed at the production rather than the music, conductor or singers (who were almost universally praised for the quality and suitability of their voices in Toronto), largely betray the writers' own aesthetic tastes (which tend to be rather literal when it comes to assessing visual components of the performance), exhibiting self-aggrandising prejudices, and a pejorative, if amusing writing style.<sup>323</sup> Rarely, in this case, are reviews balanced and neutral; however, a number

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<sup>321</sup> For example, Michael Vincent's review for the Toronto *Star*: 'A puppet on a stripper's pole. A wall of knives and invisible doors. A tattoo-covered priest in a "Canadian tuxedo" and combat boots with a kink for sniffing women's knickers ... Opinions will surely be divided, but with a show as dramatically complex as this was, it is also exactly why it is so deliciously interesting.' Contrast with the *Globe and Mail*'s considered endorsement, by Robert Harris in Toronto: 'The decisions Jones has made to update and deepen the resonances of the opera work beautifully both to preserve the integrity of the original and add to it touches and textures that only a modern audience can appreciate. Those resonances begin with the setting. Jones has taken the story of Ariodante, a simple Renaissance tale of jealousy, deception and eventual reconciliation, and placed it in the suffocating world of the 1970s Outer Hebrides of Scotland. Intentionally or not, a Canadian audience cannot fail to see in these homespun clothes, immediate passions and narrow, dogmatic, community life echoes of a Newfoundland outport or isolated Maritime village... Then there's the set for *Ariodante*, a clever tripartite arrangement, three rooms divided by the simplest of gates that allow action to proceed in all three places simultaneously, allowing for a wealth of psychological suggestions and counter-suggestions that immediately modernize the original. Those gates are immensely symbolic in Jones's productions, which is all about doors opening, and more often closing, in the community's life – closing on people, ideas, forgiveness, faith... If you needed one example to demonstrate why modern staging and perfectly realized music from the past need each other, this was it.'

<sup>322</sup> There have been many studies into these areas of both quantitative and qualitative measurement, often deployed politically to endorse the cultural value of the arts beyond the economic value-for-money argument made in response to devastating cuts in state funding. It has also been acknowledged, however, there will always be an element of experiencing the arts that remains subjective and elusive to measurement, see Vassilka Shishkova, *General Mapping of Types of Impact Research in the Performing Arts Sector (2005-2015)*, IETM, 3 and 11. <[www.ietm.org](http://www.ietm.org)> [last accessed on 2 September 2015].

<sup>323</sup> One example was James Sohre's review for *Opera Today*: 'the updated "realm" consists of a massive, unattractive setting that is one large part community meeting hall and one small part private residence. Well, "residence" in the sense that Ginerva's bedroom and a cramped, ill-used "foyer" were all that were seen other than the rather primitive common room. From the numbingly ugly bedroom wallpaper, to the floating doorknobs that open/close non-existent "doors," to the confusing configuration of entrances, this was a depressing, intentionally dull atmosphere, meant to convey a mandated routine and an oppressive societal structure. Set designer ULTZ was also responsible for the drab, purposefully provincial costumes. The attire was at times confusing (chorus women were dressed as men but danced as women), at best functional (such as the wedding gown that gets passed around), and at worst, defeating (the titular prince

provide caveats to temper their frustrations with the production in phrases such as ‘taken on its own terms’ and ‘within its dramatic suppositions’.<sup>324</sup> These, at least, acknowledge the contractual parameters of an approach that licenses artistic prerogatives of the production, but to my mind fall back on preconceived or pre-drawn maps of the operatic work and a vaguely envisioned spectacle, while citing some rather disembodied notion of ‘the music’.

Audio recordings and radio broadcasts of opera performances allow listeners to imagine their own visual fantasies, arguably appealing further to an audience’s own narrative experience, sensibilities and bias to engage with them. As a practitioner, my own frustrations with reviewers (and collaborators) veer towards the lack of self-proclaimed bias and political agenda that so often colours a sense of ‘ownership’ (informed or otherwise) of the material. This remains an obstacle to accepting the contractual terms of dialogical realism (on both sides of the pit), influencing the odds of the ‘reality bet’.

## **7 – Re-conception, reception and controversy in Chicago**

In the context of my creative practice as research, I believe it is worth reporting in greater detail some of my observations and experience of directing this production’s most recent revival as its reception caused some controversy. The running time of the production (with the necessarily longer interval breaks at Lyric Opera of Chicago) was going to come dangerously close to the contractual limits of the orchestra’s hours for performances scheduled for that season. Amidst contractual renegotiations with AGMA and the orchestra,<sup>325</sup> and the unconscionable risk of triggering overtime payments, the management decided that 20 minutes needed to be cut from the opera. Inevitably this had a significant impact, but after some discussion via email, the conductor (Harry Bickett) and the production’s original director (Richard Jones) approved the cuts I was asked to propose and we were able to calculate bringing the show in, with two twenty-five minute

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looks like a hang-dog village simpleton).’ Full review: [http://www.operatoday.com/content/2016/10/cocd\\_up\\_ariodan.php](http://www.operatoday.com/content/2016/10/cocd_up_ariodan.php) last accessed 10/07/2017.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

<sup>325</sup> AGMA is the unionized American Guild of Musical Artists.

intervals, safely under four hours. This was to be the first time LOC had ever performed the opera, but was the production's fourth outing, in the largest co-producing venue.<sup>326</sup>

Dramaturgically speaking, the cuts served to advance the action of the story. The Gavotte in the overture was cut, as was Scene Four in its entirety (Polinesso's recitative and aria 'Coperta la frode'). The middle and *da capo* sections of the King's Act I aria ('Voli colla sua tromba') were cut, meaning the celebratory decorations erected across the set in the production needed to happen more quickly to transform the space. The orchestral ballets that preceded the puppet shows (and were staged as Scottish dances) were cut, as were a couple of other orchestral *sinfonias*, Ginevra's short 'resurrection' recitative and *arioso*, the whole of the Dalinda-Lurcanio duet, and middle and *da capo* sections of the Ginevra-Ariodante duet in Act III. The silent plays at the beginning of Acts II and III of the production were also substantially contracted. Musical casualties and transitions aside, the overall impact of the re-conception of the show did make it flow more like a play, and 'feel' less long to us as modern-day storytellers. In that respect, the cuts worked in the production's favour. The lighting designer preferred this version and as a production team, we agreed that the show had never felt more polished, in spite of regrettable musical omissions.

The venue itself, one of the largest in North America, presented other challenges that needed addressing, such as in the scale and legibility of 'naturalistic' details. Physical gestures, props, puppetry sequences, sightlines and written text (the gothic font used for the Bible quotations on the surtitle screen during the overture and on the banner, unfurled as part of the puppetry sequences in Acts I and III) were all subsequently reconceived.

In anticipation of the challenging nature of the production (based on its previous incarnations), General Director Anthony Freud confided in a conversation with me that, in his opinion, audiences at LOC follow a path to shutting down to new productions if they are not clearly signposted: 'I don't understand it' leads quickly to 'it makes me feel stupid' and 'I don't like to feel stupid' which converts to 'it is stupid; reject and condemn it as stupid'. With this in mind, I was invited to write an accessible synopsis and

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<sup>326</sup> With a seating capacity of 3,563 the Lyric Opera of Chicago is the second largest opera auditorium in North America.

‘Director’s Note’ explaining the production’s approach to staging *Ariodante* to be published in the programme (as I had done for COC), included in the appendices to this chapter. The programme also featured a more scholarly article on the history and musical features of the opera by Lyric’s resident dramaturg, Roger Pines, as well as an article by Meg Huskins filling the programme’s ‘Modern Match’ slot (an attempt to reach out to audiences through popular cultural references) in which structural and thematic comparisons were drawn between *Ariodante* and modern American television shows like *Glee*, *Smash* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*. This particular attempt to engage American audiences was new to me, may seem rather crass to European eyes, ‘dumbing down’ to the *cognoscenti*, or indeed laudable to those in public relations. In any case, I read it as an attempt to increase accessibility to the art form by providing relatable cultural context, orienting potential audiences, or signposting Den Tandt’s so-called ‘referential contract’; however, further research on the effectiveness of such strategies to engage, or shut out audiences would be valuable.

I had published an earlier version of this current chapter,<sup>327</sup> which Anthony Freud and Roger Pines had read before I went to Chicago to direct the opera. Anthony Freud subsequently invited me to speak about the production alongside him at an informal pre-performance sponsors’ dinner, as well as fielding questions at a post-performance event on the opening night. I was also filmed by the marketing department speaking about the production for the LOC website, posted along with promotional videos edited from footage recorded at the dress rehearsal, interviews with Alice Coote (cast in the title role) and the puppeteers involved in the production.<sup>328</sup> These efforts to engage audiences (and sponsors) were met with some of the most extreme and polarised responses I have witnessed to this production, from live audiences, in the press and in online comments to review articles.

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<sup>327</sup> B. Davis, ‘Staging *Ariodante*’ in *Musicology Research* (Issue 5, Autumn 2018): <https://musicologyresearch.co.uk/publications/staging-ariodante-cultural-cartographies-and-dialogical-performance/>

<sup>328</sup> See Lyric Opera of Chicago website: [https://www.lyricopera.org/concertstickets/calendar/2018-2019/ariodante-opera-tickets#/Overview?&\\_suid=155206107943702868238196811178](https://www.lyricopera.org/concertstickets/calendar/2018-2019/ariodante-opera-tickets#/Overview?&_suid=155206107943702868238196811178) last accessed 08/03/2019. For my video interview: [https://www.lyricopera.org/concertstickets/calendar/2018-2019/ariodante-opera-tickets?video\\_autoplay=yes&video=zX\\_rib5fAVc#/Overview](https://www.lyricopera.org/concertstickets/calendar/2018-2019/ariodante-opera-tickets?video_autoplay=yes&video=zX_rib5fAVc#/Overview) last accessed 06/03/2019.

On the opening night, Alice Coote (scheduled to perform the title role) cancelled due to illness and so Julie Miller, her valiant cover (repeatedly acknowledged as such on the night and in the press), went on as Ariodante. Whilst there was applause after many of the arias and production set pieces, the audience had visibly thinned by the third act and after two intervals. The majority of audience members that remained, however, were very appreciative. At curtain down in the wing, the General Director, the Chairman of the Board of Directors and his wife (a physician, with whom I had sat for the pre-performance dinner) congratulated me enthusiastically on my work on the production.

At the post-performance event, along with further congratulatory feedback, I was somewhat press-ganged by a group of sponsors who had many questions they wanted answering. Whilst some were clearly disturbed by the production choices (the casting of Polinesso as a charlatan priest and the staged sexual violence against Dalinda were predictably contentious) all those with whom I had quite heated discussions by the end expressed how much they had appreciated the evening. Questions included the perennial ‘why update the setting?’ as well as ‘is the message anti-church?’ and ‘why did Polinesso have to be a priest?’. I came away with a sense that the production had generated strong reactions and heated debate; nonetheless, I was thankful for the somewhat gruelling opportunity to defend the production, whilst championing the cast, and heartened by the power of post-show dialogues with the cast and creative team to meaningfully engage with audiences and sponsors.

Notable (for its rarity) was the *inclusive* way Anthony Freud acknowledged and thanked many of the stakeholders in the production by name and with generous individual praise, detailing: major sponsors, production team, technical and music staff, cast, continuo players and conductor. The food and open bar until 1.30am certainly contributed to the vibrant success of the post-performance event, which has become rare (certainly in the UK) and lent an air of corporate hospitality to my experience of the evening. In my view, post-performance opportunities to discuss productions with those involved in their making increase the sense of audience participation and shared ownership in their experience of performances, as well as access to the material of opera. Whilst pre-performance talks and insight events are now commonly held in many opera companies, post-performance conversations with company members are quite rare in

comparison with productions of plays at major theatres. This strikes me as an area opera companies who wish to further develop relationships with their audiences might explore more concertedly, although I would anticipate resistance to the idea from within company cultures.

The press notices in Chicago were polarised, in a similar vein to those in Toronto, although more extreme. Those reviewers that were positive about the performances and production were wholehearted in their praise, awarding maximum stars in the *Chicago Tribune* ('Vocally, visually and dramatically arresting')<sup>329</sup> and *Bachtrack.com* ('A vibrant, urgent *Ariodante* at Lyric Opera of Chicago' employing phrases such as: 'platinum quality in every sense' and 'top tier musical-dramatic figure').<sup>330</sup> Meanwhile elsewhere, vitriolic criticism was levelled at the production's 'overrated English directors who foist their solipsistic outrages on great operas' and British General Director of LOC (Anthony Freud) for bringing 'Eurotrash' to Chicago, resonating ironically with the production's conceit of an outsider (Polinesso) who causes havoc to the moral compass of a community.<sup>331</sup>

One consistent feature of the published criticisms levelled at the production in Chicago (and Toronto) is a relish in descriptive details of 'offensive' or 'crass' sexual content amongst the crimes against Handel's 'beautiful' music. To my mind, fixation on these details (in sequences totalling less than ten minutes of the four-hour evening) somewhat ironically serves to betray an author's political and aesthetic bias, in this instance towards conservatism. Moreover, what such moral outrage reveals under critical scrutiny is an underpinning set of values that sound alarm bells in the ears of those that have taken them to heart: deafening, and blinding them to other perspectives, colouring their whole experience. The use of language condemning production choices as 'adolescent' versus the 'adult' audiences of Chicago (in a blanket reaction to sexual

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<sup>329</sup> The full review 'A startling update of Handel's *Ariodante*' by Howard Reich is available to those in the USA on the Chicago Tribune website, however, content from this website is unavailable in most European countries. See: [www.chicagotribune.com](http://www.chicagotribune.com)

<sup>330</sup> For the full review by Katherine Syer, see: <https://bachtrack.com/review-handel-ariodante-davies-rae-bickett-lyric-opera-chicago-march-2019> last accessed on 08/03/2018.

<sup>331</sup> Lawrence A. Johnson's well-observed and highly polemical review, 'Worthy Handel singing buried by scabrous excess in Lyric Opera's *Ariodante*' for Chicago Classical Review. The full review, with posted comments, mostly concurring with Johnson's view of the production, is available at: <http://chicagoclassicalreview.com/2019/03/worthy-handel-singing-buried-by-scabrous-excess-in-lyric-operas-ariodante/> last accessed 09/03/2018.

content and an emotional rejection of violence on stage in opera) is a noticeable difference to the production's press reception in more liberal societies, such as Amsterdam. One irony of this is that Chicago is a city renowned for its liberal theatre scene and audiences, within the same vicinity as the Lyric Opera.<sup>332</sup> Another aspect of this somewhat entrenched political divide (around the relative (im)maturity of opera directors and audiences) is that (unsurprisingly) only positive reviews of productions are quoted on the LOC website and Facebook page; marketing is performative and good notices (rather than controversy or debate) are still relied upon to sell tickets to diverse audiences.

The more considered reviews situate the production within its wider political contexts, as well as detailing external factors that contribute to its realisation, such as singers' individual circumstances (like Alice Coote's unfortunate ill health or the fact that Brenda Rae, who sang the role of Ginevra, was actually six months pregnant) as distinct from production ideas about character; they consider a production's scheduling within a season of operas and voice the values they expect to be honoured by an opera-producing company in their city.<sup>333</sup> These are less common and cut to the chase: in directly addressing the values of politically divided nations, art made according to a contemporary realist blueprint is going to divide opinion.

As a last, ethically sensitive detail, I include my reflections on a telephone conversation I had with Anthony Freud on my return to the UK, after the second performance (where Alice Coote performed the role of Ariodante with aplomb, by all accounts, in spite of suffering from late-diagnosed pneumonia). Two details of the

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<sup>332</sup> That such different music, theatre and opera cultures co-exist in Chicago and audience members overlap (to an extent) was fascinating to me, particularly in the light of an unforgettably inclusive evening I spent at Chicago Blues venue Kingston Mines (in between the dress rehearsal and opening night of *Ariodante* in 2019) where local artist Nellie Travis gave a witty and affecting performance of Blues standard 'Oil And Water Don't Mix'. See a similar rendition posted 10 years earlier at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsDX5t5nGP0>

<sup>333</sup> For example, Hannah De Priest's positive review for schmopera.com concludes:

'All in all, this *Ariodante* exemplifies what I hope to see more of from the Lyric in future seasons: creative, specific staging performed by committed and compelling singer-actors, with top-notch direction in the pit. Especially when compared with *Idomeneo* and *La Traviata* this season, in which singers with few observable dramatic instincts were set adrift in productions that felt half-baked, *Ariodante* pulsed with emotion and suspense—no small feat for a lesser-known Handel opera clocking in at around the four-hour mark.'

<https://www.schmopera.com/chicago-ariodante-pulses-with-emotion-and-suspense/> last accessed 13/3/2019.



production were thought (by Anthony Freud) to be ‘the straw that broke the camel’s back’ for a reactionary segment of the audience base: the bruises on Dalinda’s body after a stylised but violent sexual encounter with Polinesso, and the latter’s drawing of an erect penis, planted in Ginevra’s bedroom to incriminate her as immoral.<sup>334</sup> In considering sponsor criticisms and sensitivities, Anthony and I took the pragmatic decision together to cut that particular drawing and dull down the makeup of Dalinda’s bruises for the rest of the scheduled performances. Neither alteration in my opinion (which I know would not have been shared by everyone in the production team), would severely impact the production narrative; however, the affected singers were understandably unhappy about the changes (because they had integrated and been committed to these elements in their universally praised performances). Weighing up the merits of such an artistic intervention, whether these changes would indeed render the production more palatable to LOC audiences is difficult to claim, but I understood this as a concession that Anthony could report to sponsors who threatened to withdraw their patronage, in a move to keep the conversation open (and money flowing). On reflection, I doubt I would have reached the same decision based on similar feedback in a European country, because of my own bias towards how opera is still at least partly funded by the state in liberal societies, where the creative remit is oriented towards challenging as well as delighting audiences. To my mind, these are among the more nuanced political and diplomatic decisions taken in running an opera company (particularly in America), balancing stakeholder expectations and tastes, while demonstrating a desire to educate and continue dialogue between artists and audiences.

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<sup>334</sup> The idea of portraying Ginevra as an amateur artist was not in the Aix version, but was added to the production late in the process in Amsterdam, during its first co-production revival, when Richard Jones joined for the stage rehearsals. Ginevra, in her bedroom, drew a charcoal portrait of Ariodante during his first aria ‘Qui d’amor nel suo linguaggio’, presenting it to him at the end. Following Ariodante’s celebratory ‘Con l’ali di costanza’ aria, Dalinda then tidied away the drawing in a scene with Polinesso, who noticed it, later planting a number of additional, lewd images in Ginevra’s bag (during his Act II aria ‘Se l’inganno’) as a way of discrediting her. The drawings of male nudes were then discovered by Lurcanio (her accuser) and brandished as proof of debauchery by the community to condemn Ginevra at the end of the Sin City Act II puppet show. On a metaphorical level, this staging was an attempt to illustrate how the community turns on and vilifies those with imagination (celebrated in Act I) when they appear to challenge its codes of morality. The ‘pornographic’ drawings, therefore, were a considered directorial choice to make an important conceptual and political point (whether in good taste is clearly debatable, but the decision was not made on an ‘adolescent’ whim).

## 8 – Conclusion

As a group of practitioners and makers of productions, we aim to make the work in which *we* can believe as artists gathered from an international and interdisciplinary community, albeit a relatively well educated and privileged one. When it comes to realism in opera, as perhaps any form, the question gravitates towards *whose* realism is under scrutiny. An opera production inevitably communicates cultural values that are variously affirmed, ignored or challenged on the level of the production's reception and in the press. These discourses can, in their turn, be the subject of analysis in a continuation of the dialogical spaces generated by the production, particularly as it not only travels to but is also revived by different co-producing houses for their opera-going communities. Occasionally, changes to the production itself will be made as a result of its critical reception. It is, however, in the virtual spaces of social media and the blogosphere as much as academic circles that the critics themselves may be critiqued, although the impact of negative notices on the perceived success of opera productions, and careers of those involved, is rarely held to account.

Ultimately, operatic hermeneutics produce spaces from the interplay of actual and virtual elements that constellate around musical form. Opera, as a total art form, demands an open and complex engagement with the virtual as an imaginative exploration of the real, or of reality as experienced by human beings – a co-created hallucination, if you will; it tests the limits of the contractual parameters of reference and reality, becoming most powerfully affecting, plausible and 'real' when its metanarrative intersects with the personal narratives we each bring to the event. From the cartographic processes involved in creating and promoting a production, to the varied off-shoot forms, paratexts and commentary that reinterpret it, the increasingly dialogical staging of opera repositions the performer, critic and audience (in the broadest sense) as cultural orienteers and performers in their own reality matrix.

In conclusion, I return to the quotation from *A Thousand Plateaus*, which is a definition of music, of the map, of the way art reimagines what we perceive to be real in order to glimpse at some truth about our sense of space and place in the world. Whether it is to our taste, resonant or dissonant to an audience's set of values, staged opera can be both poetic and real to the extent to which it is given meaningful context, with reference

to actual forms and human experience, and is grounded by them in our understanding. In my opinion, the ‘truth’ of music as performance and of any MAP, therefore, is to be sought in the live encounter and interplay of actual and virtual worlds. Opera may be uniquely positioned to explore this territory because its heightened idiom continues to test the boundaries of our ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ in its propositions, and because of the potential dialogical richness of its expressive means and staging in the twenty-first century.

## **Appendix A – Synopsis of *Ariodante***

### **ACT I**

Ginevra tells Dalinda that she is in love with Ariodante and that they have the blessing of her father, the King. Polinesso enters and expresses his love for Ginevra, who rejects him. Dalinda tells Polinesso that Ariodante is his rival, but she also hints at her own feelings for Polinesso, who decides to use Dalinda to destroy Ariodante.

Ariodante and Ginevra are overjoyed when the King gives the order for their wedding to be celebrated the next day. Polinesso leads Dalinda to believe he loves her. Lurcanio, Ariodante's brother, confesses to Dalinda that he loves her, but he is rejected. Ariodante and Ginevra celebrate their wedding eve.

### **INTERMISSION**

### **ACT II**

Later that night, Polinesso tells Ariodante that he is already Ginevra's lover and is surprised that Ariodante is marrying her. Ariodante conceals himself and Dalinda, disguised as Ginevra, invites Polinesso into her room. Ariodante is devastated by what he believes he has seen. Lurcanio, who witnesses the same, prevents Ariodante from killing himself, convincing him instead to seek revenge.

News is brought to the King that Ariodante has plunged from a cliff into the sea and is presumed drowned. Ginevra collapses in grief. Lurcanio claims that Ariodante has killed himself because of Ginevra's infidelity and he is willing to defend his story to anyone who will challenge him.

### **INTERMISSION**

### **ACT III**

Ariodante has survived but is in torment. He meets Dalinda. She now understands Polinesso's trickery and explains all to Ariodante.

Polinesso challenges Lurcanio's story. They will duel with Polinesso as Ginevra's champion. She resists this but the King insists despite Ginevra's protests.

During the duel, Lurcanio fatally injures Polinesso. A new challenger appears who reveals himself to be Ariodante, seemingly back from the grave. He promises to explain everything as long as Dalinda is forgiven her innocent part in Polinesso's deception. Polinesso dies, having confessed everything. The King attempts to reunite the traumatized lovers and community with a celebratory blessing.

## Appendix B – ‘Director’s Note’

(Published in the programmes for COC (2016) and LOC (2019) and on the LOC website).

### Director's Note on *Ariodante*

*Ariodante* stands out as one of Handel’s more melancholy works. It’s full of psychologically rich and interesting characters, with innocent lovers Ariodante and Ginevra at the center of it all. Inspired by the original Edinburgh setting of the opera, we set this production on a remote Scottish island in the late 1960s or early ’70s. It’s a close-knit, male-dominated community with a strong moral center rooted in Calvinism. Their industry is based on fishing and wool, which is reflected in the costume designs that have islanders dress in Aran-style sweaters and kilts. It’s a physical, working community, so while the production is set in the twentieth century, there is a sense of timelessness in the costumes and the dress is similar for men and women. Only Ginevra stands apart, with her more feminine clothes.

The islanders are essentially good people. Though they may have weaknesses, they have a strong moral compass. There is only one character who is really, actively bad among them: Polinesso. In our production, he takes the form of an outsider: a charlatan preacher from a city on the mainland. He’s charismatic and interested in young women who haven “ecstatic” qualities, such as Ginevra. But he has a very cruel, misogynistic streak, reminiscent of certain passages in the Old Testament. The king of the island is in a psychological slump after the death of his wife and takes comfort in Polinesso’s teachings, blind to the evil infiltrating his community.

While the opera is titled *Ariodante*, Ginevra is the other character at its heart. She’s a young woman singled out and punished by a male-dominated community for her sense of imagination and fantasy. In our production, she makes a very important decision, in the light of everything that happens to her, that radically reinterprets the opera’s traditional ending and paradigm of redemption. Her betrothed from a neighboring island, Ariodante, is sensitive, sincere and noble-hearted, both in happiness and defeat. Lurcanio (Ariodante’s brother), driven by his anger and sense of justice, encourages the king to act violently. Dalinda (the other main female character in the opera) is tortured by her own blinkered desire and Polinesso’s machinations. In the midst of this, Ginevra is always moving forward, while the others are immobilized by their anger, their masochism, or their depression.

While we’ve taken inspiration from the nineteenth-century theater of Ibsen and Strindberg for the overall style of the production, we’ve added a choreographed dimension to our sense of realism that responds to the formality of eighteenth-century musical forms, punctuating our psychological exploration of *Ariodante*. A significant feature of the production is that we stage the “Dances” composed at the end of each act as puppet sequences performed by the island community as expressions of their hopes and fears, in response to unfolding events.

— Benjamin Davis, *Revival Director*  
*Reprinted courtesy of the Canadian Opera Company*

## Appendix C – video records of the full production

See corresponding video files on accompanying USB memory stick.

## Appendix D – further examples of production maps

Example of a scene breakdown (for Act I) compiled by Canadian Opera Company and flight paths for the chorus at Lyric Opera of Chicago during ‘the riot’ scene in Act II, made by the assistant director (David Toulson) during the rehearsal process as an *aide memoire* for the chorus, stage management and understudies.



ARIODANTE  
Scene Breakdown – Version 3

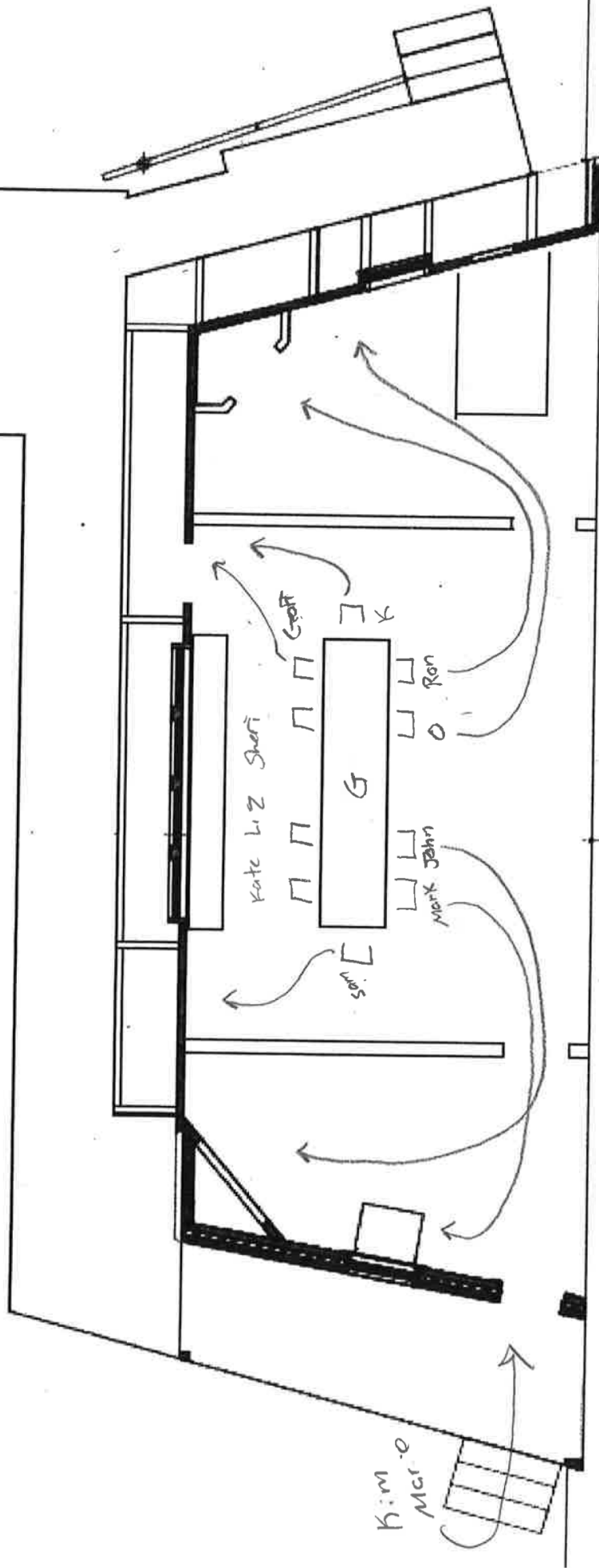
Page 1 of 3

Monday, September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016

		ACT I – 1:07:05												
Scene :		Sc. 1	Sc. 2	Sc. 3	Sc. 4	Sc. 5	Sc. 6	Sc. 7	Sc. 8	Sc. 9	Sc. 10	Sc. 11	Sc. 12 & 13	(end of Act 1)
Music:	Overture	1. Aria“Vezzi, singhe...”, Recit	Recit & 2. Aria - Orinda agli occhi miei...	Recit & 3. Aria – Aprile le luci...	Recit & 4. Aria – “Coperta la frode di lana servile...”	5. Aria– “Qui D’amor nel suo linguaggio...”, Recit & No. 6 Duetto	Recit & 7. Aria – “Volate Amore...”	Recit & 8. Aria – “Voli colla sua tromba...”	Recit & 9. Aria - Con l’ali di costanza...”	Recit & 10. Aria – “Spero, Spero...”	Recit & 11. Aria - “ Del mio sol vezzosira...”	Recit & 12. Aria – “ Il primo ardor...”	Recit, Recit & Sinfonia Duetto e Coro, Ballo, Musette I & II, Coro e Soli	
Page Number: Bärenreiter	1	6	11	15	19	23-A	31	38	44	53	59	64	68	86
Running Time:	0:00	4:30	7:30	10:15	14:45	19:15	24:15	29:30	34:00	41:30	47:15	54:00	57:45	
Scene length:	4:30	3:00	2:45	4:30	4:30	5:00	5:15	4:30	7:30	5:45	6:45	3:45	9:20	
VIDEO TIMING:						20:00	25:15	30:10	34:50	42:10	47:53	54:48	58:23	1:07:42
ARIODANTE Alice Coote U.S.: Emily D’Angelo						A	A	a	A	a	end	a	A	
GINEVRA Jane Archibald U.S.: Jennifer Taverner	g	G	G			G	G	g	g	g	end	g	G	
DALINDA Ambur Braid U.S.: Danika Lorèn	d	D	d	D		d	d	d	d	D	D	D	d XT p. 69	
POLINESSO Vardhui Abrahamyan U.S.: Lauren Eberwein	p	p	P	P	P				end	P	p	p		
KING of SCOTLAND Johannes Weisser U.S.:	k	k				NT. p.30	K	K	k	XT. P. 56	end	k	k	
LURCANIO Owen McCausland U.S.:						NT. p.30	I	I	I	XT. P. 56	L	I	I	
ODOARDO Aaron Sheppard U.S.: Charles Sy	o					NT. p.30	o	O				o	o	
WOMEN’S CHORUS (6)	S.L. J.R.					NT. p.30	X	X	X	X	end	X	X	
MEN’S CHORUS (6)	5					NT. p.30	X	X	X	X	end	X	X	
PUPPETEERS (4)	2						X	X	X	X		X	X	

CAPITAL INITIALS :indicate person is singing onstage / lower case initials: indicate person is onstage but not singing

# P137 "The Riot"



Ron pull down hearts  
O doardo spot

Tyler  
Sam

Ken

Tommy

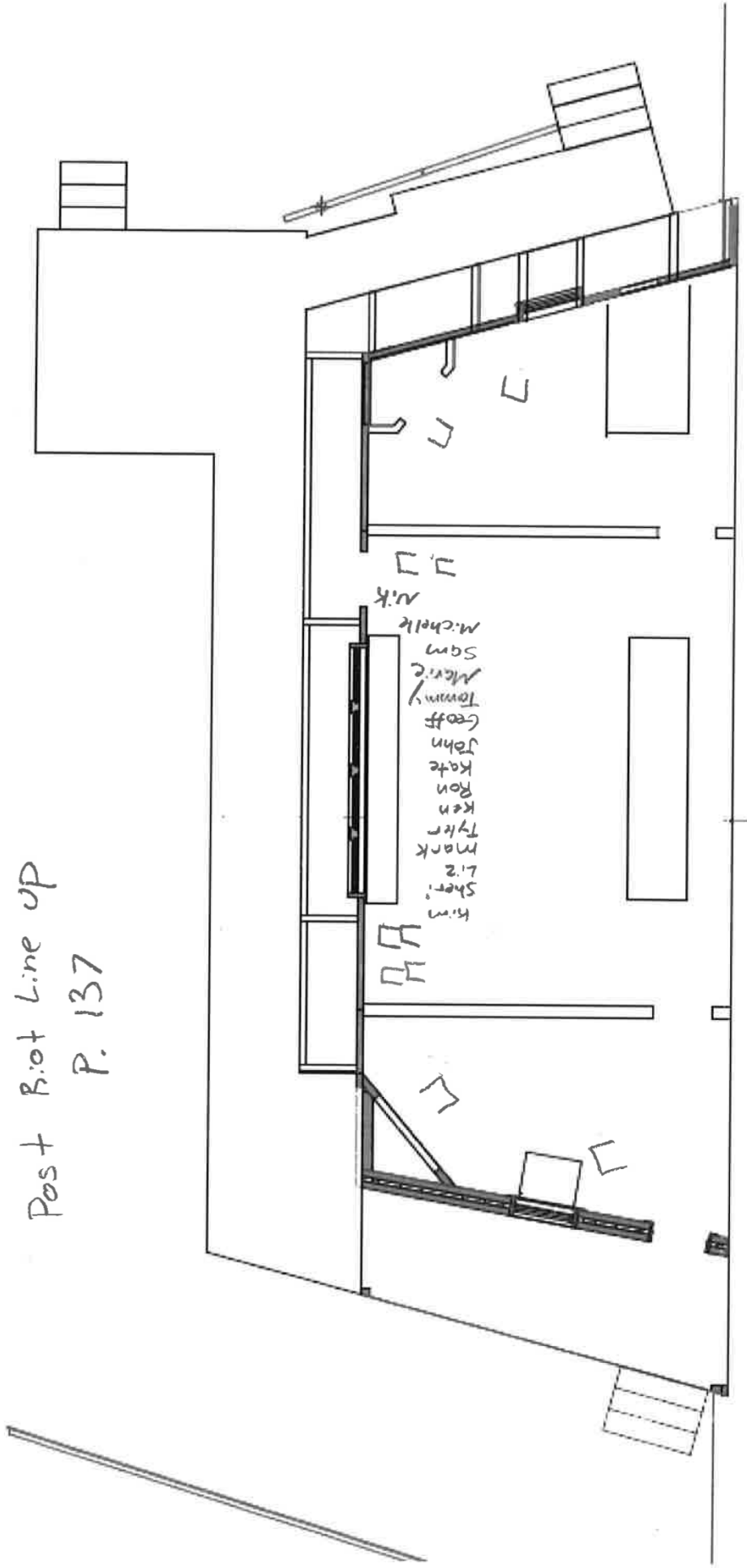
move table  
DS w/⊙ on it

Liz on Bureau to pull  
down hearts  
Shari spot SR  
Graft spot SL

Kim pull  
down hearts  
Mark spot

Marie  
pulls down  
hearts

Post Riot Line up  
P. 137



Ron on G's shoulders  
Ken on G's hips  
Tyler on G's Feet

Slide ⊗ SR into  
Chair at end of area  
before puppet show #2

P. 142a



## Chapter 5

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### **Case Study 2: *Written On Skin***

#### **Summary:**

In this second case study chapter I draw upon my own creative practice and working records as a stage director of George Benjamin and Martin Crimp's operatic collaboration *Written On Skin* (2012), to give context to my interrogation of its themes. Contemporary notions of reflexivity and performativity, along with questions about representation and agency, are central to this opera as well as to auto-ethnography and practice as research. In relation to my role in the world premiere production in Aix-en-Provence, as *collaborateur artistique à la mise-en-scène*, I critically reflect on my own processes of generating a hybrid 'semi-staging', as a distillation of production cartographies within performance conventions of the concert platform. Thus, I situate my own directorial presence as a facilitator of dialogical communication between visible orchestral players, the conductor, and a largely 'virtual' production embodied by the singers; the narrative is anchored in the staging by a minimal number of actual props and paratexts, such as surtitles, promotional and programme material.

In the light of my own experience, I revisit the theatrical strain of the performance paradigm, in which the 'liminoid' nature of performance is foregrounded in order to consciously present material to be embodied and interpreted. My own journey with this opera has traversed political, social and cultural realms in a process of experimentation with changing casts, players and conductors in order to stage and tour it extensively.

Finally, addressing the 'doubleness' of being both practitioner and researcher, I reflect on the wider implications of my experience in this case study to the international performance and production of opera as it evolves in the twenty-first century, positioning my own creative practice as a form of resistance to the evacuation of production values based on measures and paradigms of knowledge serving 'efficiency'.

## **Semi-staging *Written On Skin***

**An experiment in the ‘doubleness’ of lived experience and unfolding performative invention.**

... performance will be to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries what discipline was to the eighteenth and nineteenth, that is, an onto-historical formation of power and knowledge. This formation is ontological in that it entails a displacement of being that challenges our notion of history; it is nonetheless historical in that this displacement is materially inscribed.<sup>335</sup>

### **1 – Introduction**

Everything can be perceived as a performance. Such is the assertion of a contested yet evolving paradigm (and discipline of Performance Studies) when we bring a set of performance questions to our focus of attention. Contemporary notions of performativity and reflexivity,<sup>336</sup> along with questions about representation and agency also concern auto-ethnographic practices, the creative practitioner-researcher and, I shall argue, the opera *Written On Skin*. As a fully staged production for the Aix-en-Provence Festival and a fistful of other major European co-producers, George Benjamin and Martin Crimp’s second operatic collaboration has drawn considerable attention since its world premiere in 2012.<sup>337</sup> Within the context of my own creative practice and working records as a stage director of this operatic work, I shall interrogate its themes and their relevance to ‘cultural performance’ as a platform for self-examination.<sup>338</sup>

I have elsewhere asserted, following Deleuze and Guattari, that the act of mapping performance is itself a performative ‘experiment with the real’ and an intrinsic

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<sup>335</sup> McKenzie, J., *Perform or Else*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p.18.

<sup>336</sup> ‘Performativity’ was first defined by philosopher of language John L. Austin in *How To Do Things With Words* (1962) as the capacity of speech and communication to function as a form of social action. Since then many theorists have used the term and debated Austin’s definition and application of it. ‘Reflexivity’ is broadly considered to occur when the observations or actions of observers affect the very situations they are observing. The term has also evolved two distinct meanings in anthropology: one that refers to the researcher’s awareness of an analytic focus on his or her relationship to the field of study, and another that attends to the ways cultural practices involve consciousness and commentary on themselves. Within the discipline of Performance Studies see: Turner, Victor. ‘Dramatic Ritual/Ritual Drama: Performative and Reflexive Anthropology.’ *The Kenyon Review* Vol. 1, No. 3 (Summer, 1979), pp. 80-93

<sup>337</sup> A Google search of the opera will show many images and promotional videos of the Aix production.

<sup>338</sup> MacAloon, J., (ed.), *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Towards a Theory of Cultural Performance*, (Philadelphia: Institute for the Society of Human Issues, 1984) p.1 for a definition of cultural performances: ‘They are occasions in which as a culture or society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and histories, present ourselves with alternatives’.

part of staging contemporary productions of opera.<sup>339</sup> In chapter two of the present study, I detail how auto-ethnography, or self-documentation, acquires wider relevance through self-critical practices, cultural contextualisation and exegesis, or critical writing on practice. This becomes increasingly relevant when considering audiences.<sup>340</sup> It is my belief that musical and stage directors, as well as performers, must grapple with such issues as they aspire to bring together means with which to express both emotion and conceptual thinking, through embodied knowledge in musical performance.

Meanwhile, in practice-as-research there is the ‘doubleness’ of being both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, the researcher and an intrinsic part of the researched community (how New Materialist Tim Ingold defines anthropology and ‘participant observation’).<sup>341</sup> I find Ingold’s idea of ‘correspondence’ between the minds of makers and the material world both persuasive and resonant to my experience of working in the performing arts. Performances themselves are experienced as ephemeral moments unfolding ‘in correspondence’ with the attentions of an audience. This particularly rich seam of correspondence – the theatrical strain of the performance paradigm, in which the liminoid nature of performance is foregrounded in order to consciously present material to be embodied and interpreted – shall be the main territory of exploration in this chapter.<sup>342</sup>

Thus, I undertake an investigative mapping of such themes within the opera *Written On Skin*, from the position of my own experience and professional role in the

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<sup>339</sup> See my case study chapter 5 for an expanded version of a previously published article: Davis, B., ‘Staging Ariodante: Cultural Cartographies and Dialogical Performance’, in *Musicology Research Journal*, issue 4, Spring 2018: <https://www.musicologyresearch.co.uk/publications/staging-ariodante-cultural-cartographies-and-dialogical-performance>

<sup>340</sup> Pace, I. Keynote address: ‘Spin, Self-Promotion, Institutional Recognition, and Critical Performance: Notes from the diary of a performer-scholar.’ *Beyond ‘Mesearch’* Conference, Institute of Musical Research, Senate House, London. 16-17 April 2018.

<sup>341</sup> T. Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (Routledge: London and New York, 2013), p. 3.

<sup>342</sup> The concepts of the ‘liminal’ or transformational ‘in-between’ in social rituals, and the ‘liminoid’ in modern aesthetic performances exist in a loop of mutual influence, according to Victor Turner’s anthropological theories and Richard Schechner’s famous infinity loop paradigm. Arnold Van Gennep’s first used the term ‘liminal’ in ‘Les Rites de Passage’ (1909) to describe the ‘in between’ or transition stage of a person’s social identity in rites of passage ceremonies, where a person is first separated from their social group, passes through a liminal phase, or rite of passage, and is then reintegrated into society. John Austin’s notion of ‘performativity’ in *How to do things with words* (1962) influenced anthropologist Victor Turner’s model of the liminal and ‘liminoid’ in the aesthetic sphere (‘playful’, chosen, liminal-like activity). Turner’s theory of ‘social drama’ applied the tools of textual analysis to the study of all kinds of behaviours and forms, as well as their social imperatives and implications. See Turner, V., ‘Liminal to liminoid, in play, flow, and ritual: an essay in comparative symbology.’ (1974) available online: [https://scholarship.rice.edu/bitstream/handle/1911/63159/article\\_RIP603\\_part4.pdf;sequence=1](https://scholarship.rice.edu/bitstream/handle/1911/63159/article_RIP603_part4.pdf;sequence=1)

world premiere production in Aix-en-Provence, as *collaborateur artistique à la mise-en-scène* to director Katie Mitchell, and as revival director for co-producing companies. In the context of practice as research, I offer a critical reflection on some of the cultural contexts of the opera's themes and detail my own performative processes of generating a hybrid 'semi-staging', as a distillation of production cartographies within performance conventions of the concert platform. In the latter, I situate my own directorial presence as a facilitator of dialogical communication between visible orchestral players, the conductor, and a largely 'virtual' production embodied by the singers; the narrative is anchored in the semi-staging by a minimal number of actual props and paratexts, such as surtitles, promotional and programme material tailored to audiences of each country and venue. My own journey with this opera has traversed political, social and cultural realms in a process of experimentation with changing casts, players and conductors in order to stage and tour it extensively.

Finally, addressing the 'doubleness' of being both practitioner and researcher, I reflect on the wider implications of my experience in this case study to the international performance and production of opera as it evolves in the twenty-first century. I position my own creative practice and 'unfolding performative invention' as a form of resistance to the evacuation of production values,<sup>343</sup> based on measures and paradigms of knowledge serving 'efficiency' (particularly of resources), where the performance paradigm has been appropriated in the administrative sphere.

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<sup>343</sup> 'Production values' are taken here to mean the combination of technical qualities and methods, materials and stagecraft skills used in the production of artistic performance. Examples include all aspects of the design and realization of lighting, sets, costumes, props, and quality of acting in opera.

## 2 – Doubleness, performance and the liminoid in *Written On Skin*

Richard Bauman's *International Encyclopedia of Communications* states that: 'all performance involves a consciousness of doubleness, according to which the actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of that action.'<sup>344</sup> Meanwhile, in his intellectual history of the performance paradigm, Marvin Carlson asserts that: 'Performance is always performance *for* someone, some audience that recognises and validates it as performance even when, as is occasionally the case, that audience is the self.'<sup>345</sup> Jon McKenzie's seminal analysis *Perform or Else* (2001) addresses 'the efficiency of organizational performance', 'the efficacy of cultural performance' and 'the effectiveness of technological performance', arguing that the concept of performance has become pervasive and bound to a potentially repressive 'power matrix of the New World Order'.<sup>346</sup> The prediction from his book quoted at the beginning of this chapter could be describing the liminoid device that frames the central plot of *Written On Skin*. In the latter, a group of disillusioned Angels with modern sensibilities 'snap back to life' a twelfth-century Protector and his young wife, Agnes, so that one of the Angels can take the place of the Boy in the telling of their story. The wealthy Protector welcomes the Boy into his house to make an illuminated book of his life and 'the life to come', with revelatory and devastating consequences.

## 3 – A personal perspective on making opera

The libretto and score of *Written on Skin* together carefully construct a set of multi-layered contexts and perspectives on the central narrative. An initial Chorus of Angels, whose musical text is both destructive of the trappings of modernity and forcefully restorative of pre-industrial and medieval life, set up the first level of exposition. A Brechtian device of self-narration is then introduced in scene 2. Dramaturgically, this serves to establish and remind an audience of the character each of the singers is voicing

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<sup>344</sup> Quoted in Carlson, M. *Performance: a critical introduction* (1996, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2004), p.5.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> McKenzie, J., *Perform or Else*, p.189. The 'or else' of organizational efficiency is economic and social failure, of cultural efficacy is normalization, and where technological performance is ineffective it faces quickly becoming redundant.

in the medieval scenes: ‘says the Protector’, ‘says the Boy’, ‘says Agnes’, each time marked in the score with a drop in dynamics between the characters’ voiced text.

Following the local twelfth century legend that inspired the opera, in the Aix-en-Provence production the conceit of a re-enactment of medieval events in the design and *mise-en-scène* became a central idea and way of making sense of the third person narrative feature in the libretto. Surrounding the central re-enactment space, the production created modern, clinical-looking spaces in which historical artefacts were archived and prepared for use in re-enacted scenes, suggestive of a cold and sterile Angelic world on the margins. This was a self-conscious approach to realism in the twenty-first century from the composer, librettist and collaborating production team, where opera performance, in George Benjamin’s words, ‘acknowledges aspects of the machinery of its idiom, and through layered artifice attempts to create a space for authenticity’.<sup>347</sup> In this instance, self-narration is used to establish the *dramatis personae* of the medieval story and a meta-position of the Angel-world. Thus, a hyper reality is crafted. The hyper real becomes an attempt to paradoxically return to naturalism (trying to recreate daily life in real time) through re-enactment, for which there is distrust because an audience is always aware they are watching a performance. The third-person narrative device attempts to invert the classic play-within-a-play trope, where ‘acting’ is performed in a more self-conscious or mannered style. Here, self-narration is used, as librettist Martin Crimp has claimed, as a ‘hook’ to draw the audience into the central story and, in George Benjamin’s words, to make ‘ritual opera’, and to ‘lift the narrative off the floor’. Angel 1’s heuristic performance as the human Boy in the re-enactment becomes liminoid to the Angelic world: his experience changes him so that when he returns as Angel 1 to deliver the final illuminated page, he offers a new perspective on the story and his own part in its telling. Meanwhile, because the Boy/Angel 1 is an artist, the illuminations he paints resonate with what it is to be a reflexive ‘research practitioner’, at once inside and outside creative practice.

In quoting directly from interview transcripts in this chapter, I am conscious of further privileging the so-called ‘performative presence’ of the librettist and composer

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<sup>347</sup> In order to situate my own practice as research within a community of practitioners and their understanding of the term ‘realism’, I conducted a series of interviews with colleagues, including one with George Benjamin, during the first semi-staged tour with MCO in 2016.

through citation (as well as my own more obliquely, where I am the interviewer), which is one of the preoccupations of the post-structural performance paradigm,<sup>348</sup> and a concern in ethnographic practice around the privileging of certain discourse.<sup>349</sup> Significantly, I believe, both Martin Crimp and George Benjamin took curtain calls whenever they were personally available in each of the co-producing venues, along with numerous other ‘insight’ and promotional personal appearances, that have undoubtedly fed into the opera’s positive critical reception, as well as so-called ‘fifth wall’ conversations amongst audiences. Their physical presence at performances has served to ‘rubber stamp’ the production’s interpretation of their opera, as well as to promote themselves in their careers, and the opera’s themes in wider cultural discourse. Crimp and Benjamin’s collaborative dedication to artistic clarity and precision, in particular, has been made on numerous occasions in published and personal statements about the opera, which has arguably heightened attention to its features. For my own part, I am conscious of asserting my professional ‘insider’ identity associated with the opera’s production, as a voice of authority within the critical discourse of this text.

From a production perspective, there were performance nuances and anomalies set up from the beginning in the notion of a re-enactment: whilst Angel 1 appears to orchestrate proceedings before embodying the character of the Boy (in possession of greater knowledge in Scene 1 about ‘the Man’ and ‘the Woman’ than the other Angels), the Protector and Agnes (in narrating their own experience) are horrifyingly *forced* to re-live past events, with the disturbing knowledge they are doing so (subtly performed ‘in between’ re-enactment scenes, during scene transitions or re-enacted scenes they are not in, but for which they are still present, as if in limbo). The displaced spirit of the Boy in the story, embodied by Angel 1 for the re-enacted scenes, is never referred to in the internal logic of the production, other than that the Protector dismembers his body.

A further complexity of performance questions emerges within the production’s set design; multiple temporal spaces and the rich possibilities of simultaneity open up for

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<sup>348</sup> The second half of McKenzie’s book is devoted to what he calls the ‘citational mist’ of all performance giving rise to ‘performance’ or the whiff of forces ‘becoming mutational’ or ‘becoming normative’, p.203.

<sup>349</sup> In “Critically Queer”, *GLQ: A Journal in Gay and Lesbian Studies*, 1:1, 1993, p.17, Judith Butler writes: “Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements which, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power... The power of discourse to produce what it names is linked with the question of performativity. The performative is thus one domain in which power acts as discourse.”

exploration. Michel Foucault characterised the postmodern period as ‘the epoch of simultaneity and the epoch of juxtaposition’, although such roots certainly extend back into much earlier musical, theatrical and operatic forms.<sup>350</sup> I have discussed elsewhere how establishing the terms of narrative conventions, explicitly in a reality contract and implicitly in a referential one, have become a defining feature of contemporary ‘dialogical realism’ in opera, and how visual and spatial relationships influence our experience of music.<sup>351</sup> In the Aix production of *Written On Skin*, each room in the set, the bodies that traverse them, and the events that occur in them take on dialogical relationships, much like the pictorial illuminations would in a manuscript text. On reflection, whilst this conceit offered us a strong framework and set of Stanislavskian ‘givens’ within which to explore how to stage the opera, I think emphasis on the peripheral narrative (and the supporting spaces surrounding the re-enactment) was not always clear to audiences.

The critics, however, and many opera colleagues were seduced, if not convinced, by the aesthetics of the production and paratexts in programme and promotional material.<sup>352</sup> For example, at no point in the original sung libretto are angels quoted as such, or introduced as ‘Angels’.<sup>353</sup> The only visual reference to angels in the Aix production design, by Vicki Mortimer, was a tattoo of angel wings on one of the non-singing angels’ backs, visible as he cleans the bloodied chest of Angel 1/the Boy in the modern upstairs room, after the Boy’s murder downstairs in the penultimate scene. This deliberately oblique reference became a key promotional image for the marketing of *Written On Skin* when it was presented at the ROH Covent Garden, and visually brings the human body (and the contemporary fashion for tattoos) into association with the

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<sup>350</sup> Foucault, M., *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* October, 1984; (“Des Espace Autres,” March 1967 Translated from the French by Jay Miskowiec) available online at:

<http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>

<sup>351</sup> See Davis, B., ‘Staging *Ariodante*’ and Den Tandt, C., *On virtual grounds* (2016), available at: [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)

<sup>352</sup> Press reviews of the world premiere production largely focussed on the collaboration between George Benjamin and Martin Crimp but were also generally full of praise for Katie Mitchell and Vicky Mortimer (also long-term collaborators). For example, see Rachel Beaumont’s article, whose argument compliments my own, for ROH website, available at: <http://www.roh.org.uk/news/how-george-benjamins-opera-written-on-skin-creates-music-drama-for-the-21st-century>

<sup>353</sup> This was changed for the Aix production, where it is the Angel, rather than the Boy, who voices the third person in the last scene of the opera: ‘says the Angel’.



opera, although has nothing explicitly to do with the vellum used for the illuminated manuscripts referred to in its title.<sup>354</sup>

As revival director, during the course of touring the Aix production to the smaller stages in co-producing venues,<sup>355</sup> I was to reconfigure some of the ways in which the spaces poetically framed the main story action, without distracting or drawing the eye unintentionally. In my experience of touring and reviving productions, it is always a delicate balancing act when working through simultaneous narratives involving multiple reconfigured spaces and timings, with a level of professional fidelity to the original director's intentions for the production, in their absence. Moreover, each new venue 'performs' its own set of spatial parameters that impact on the production as originally conceived, modifying and evolving its cultural presence in the world.

Often there is the question of taste, which is political. As a revival director, there is another 'doubleness': I employ and strive to cultivate my own performative, directorial eye through the citation of another director's production map, in the same way that changes in cast must uniquely embody their roles whilst navigating and negotiating the blocking of their original creators. As a revival director and researcher through creative practice, I am doubly conscious of my own reflexive position and of moving between being inside and outside the work; I believe this affords me a unique perspective, but one that is often uncomfortable and complex because of the responsibility and power of authority invested in both roles by different stakeholders in opera productions, academic circles and audiences. Ultimately, I find, I cannot please everyone all of the time and have chosen increasingly to navigate my own path, attempting to combine critical self-reflection and artistic aspirations with a holistic (Buddhist) approach to life and directing opera. Increasingly, I see the operatic form itself evolve under competing narrative tensions, such as pairing high artistic and production aspirations with diminishing

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<sup>354</sup> The ROH poster image and promotional YouTube video featured the tattooed backs of two embracing nude models (not in the production) available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WsuTSOKYEF4>. The winged-back tattoo image was also adapted for the promotion of the opera in my semi-staged version by the Beijing Music Festival in 2018.

<sup>355</sup> In Autumn 2012, after the world premiere at the Festival in Aix-en-Provence, I directed the first co-produced presentation of the opera at le Capitôle de Toulouse, whose stage is approximately two-thirds of the size of that in Aix. A central section and the modern staircase (visible in the third part of the opera on the stage left portion of the original set) were removed. There were then two versions of the set and production blocking: the full-scale version presented in Aix, Amsterdam, New York and London, and the reduced touring version presented in Toulouse, Munich, Vienna, and Paris throughout 2013.

resources. Accordingly, I veer towards a critical realist approach, aligning my creative aspirations to the particular form and scope of musical performance I believe to be feasible, rewarding and valuable under the circumstances, tailoring my methodologies to the situation, as I perceive it. Whilst this realization has been painfully won through personal experience of working in opera where circumstances have been undesirable, I believe my Buddhist practice, as a form of self-reflexivity, informs a more compassionate approach to minimizing unnecessary suffering, even transforming it for myself and others, with a view to creating the most value from my engagement in artistic projects. This motivates my own unfolding performative invention and steers my experience of how the liminoid and parallel process (in the case of life imitating art) manifest in the lives of the people I work together with creatively.

#### **4 – Auto-ethnographies as transgression, procedure and illumination**

The Protector's initial human sin of pride in boasting of his property (which includes his wife's 'still and obedient body') is offensive to, or rather, deliberately transgresses twenty-first century sensibilities towards slavery and sexual politics. In stating ownership of 'the fields and everyone in them', with particular reference to the submissiveness of women to the will and ownership of men, the libretto dramatically pre-empts Agnes's defiance of her husband. The Protector's further promises to the Boy border on committing an act of hubris when his text is experienced from the embodying Angelic perspective: 'Make me a book. Fill it with illumination', 'Show us in our rightful place: show us in Paradise', 'I'll give you money, I'll give you light'. The question of whether Angel 1 is transgressing some greater law (God?) in resurrecting the Protector and Agnes and by embodying the Boy in a re-enactment remains open and unanswered by the opera, as well as the Aix production, although in generating a backstory for rehearsal purposes the director, Katie Mitchell, followed Nietzsche in declaring God dead.

The Composer George Benjamin has stated that the timbral world of the illuminator in his opera *Written On Skin* is a visionary one, not real, but the Boy's illuminations make reference to the real world.<sup>356</sup> The orchestration for manuscript scenes, for example, features an evocative, 'otherworldly' sound combination in the

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<sup>356</sup> From the interview I conducted with George Benjamin.

pairing of the glass harmonica and viola da gamba, whereas descriptive techniques such as the *pizzicato* of the strings in Scene 2 suggest both ‘stars’ and ‘the strict mechanism of the world’, referred to by the Protector as he explains his ownership of all the Boy’s eyes can see. These are example features of how the contracts of reference and imagined reality in the opera are drawn in the libretto and score.

In the Aix production at the Grand Théâtre de Provence, this scene was staged with both the Protector and the Boy facing the audience, as if looking through an imaginary window in the fourth wall, implicating audiences as property within projected patriarchal power. In the libretto, the narrated natural world and everyone in it are indicated by the singer to be ‘in the auditorium’ but are left to audiences to imagine from the performance of the words and music. Meanwhile, a domestic scene is depicted on stage in the full production (Agnes arranges a vase of cut flowers at a table next to where the men are positioned in the re-enactment space, whilst visually low-level preparatory action occurs for later scenes in the peripheral modern spaces by non-singing angel-archivists). *Eg.1* is a scan of my own rehearsal vocal score from 2012, with a combination of moveable post-it notes and pencil additions detailing the process of evolving blocking, generated during rehearsals for Scene 2 in the Aix production. This later crystalized into the final blocking of the scene in the production book, recorded by the assistant director on an interleaved vocal score, which became a template for future revivals.

Later in this same scene, the Protector sees an image of himself in the ‘proof’ the Boy offers of his ‘talent’ to portray envisioned values; the Boy narrates himself in the third person whilst taking ‘from his satchel an illuminated page’ on which figures portrayed are ‘not just kind, but merciful’.<sup>357</sup> The word ‘merciful’ is repeated with elaborate melisma. This draws greater attention to its significance and impending dramatic irony, embodied in the production with lingering eye contact between the Boy and Agnes, as the Protector’s attention is held and seduced by the illuminated page. Competing performativities thus emerge in tension around visionary depictions, actual

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<sup>357</sup> The mastery of skill (in this case the Boy’s to create convincing illuminations) is another category of contemporary cultural performance, identified and discussed by Carlson in *Performance: a critical, introduction* (1996, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2004). Importantly, in *Written On Skin*, skill is only one element of the Boy’s plausible performance, which ‘satisfies’ the Protector, but whose later depiction of Eve ‘doesn’t look real’ to Agnes.

objects and embodied experience.

*Scene 1 in the reduced static set touring version of the Aix production*



*Scene 2 in the Aix production. (Photographs by Stephen Cummiskey.)*



**Fig.1:** Vocal score of the beginning of Scene 2, with my own rehearsal annotations.

SCENE 2

David  
Pity  
get  
obj.

Sarah table ④  
relinquish  
grid.

**II – The Protector, the Boy and Agnès** [Mid Sept. 1211. Light, warm, splendid, sunny morning.]  
Re-enactment begins

**13** Steady (♩ = 80)

80

PROTECTOR *mf*  
Stand here. Look.

*lx switch*  
*A3 Allan*

*pp* *p*

*A3*  
*A2*

86

Prot. My house is per-fect. At night stars wheel

*pp secco*

*up stairs illumination*  
*not a table pressed?*  
*David*  
*let dining, lecture*  
*new pigments*  
*glass jars*  
*spoons*

*David*  
*lecture*  
*a flower (disturbed)*  
*little vase*  
*glass jars*  
*spoons*  
*brushes*  
*brushes*  
*gold*  
*rim mounds*  
*millar*  
*stab*  
*shells*

*modern*  
*tray*  
*vellum*  
*ink*  
*will*

Prot. o - ver my vines ac - cord-ing to the strict mech-an-i-sm of the world.

*poco* *p* *pp* *p* *pp*

*Laura long walk.*  
*to table dining*  
*original*  
*silence not got.*

**Prep. US** **Scene 2**

## 5 – Semi-staging as distillation of production cartographies

In 2016 George Benjamin asked me to stage a European concert tour of *Written On Skin* with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra. He was concerned that without staging the concert could lose focus, if the singers were left to their own devices. Being a concert platform to showcase the orchestra, production resources were very limited, as was rehearsal time in each of the touring venues.<sup>358</sup> The cast, however, were mostly original members of the Aix production,<sup>359</sup> would be ‘off copy’ and we all knew each other well.

Under such circumstances and as a matter of taste, I chose to create a distillation of the production choreography we had made in Aix; the motivational maps for scenes and characters were already in the singers’ bodies. The removal of the set and costumes implied a redefinition of an imaginative space congruent with the conventions of the concert platform. I selected a few choice props, borrowed from the original production, to suggest enough of an actual context for both the singers and the audience to follow the narrative, and leave much of the rest to the imagination. In the process of rehearsing the semi-staging, I reduced the number of props for the whole opera from several hundred in the Aix production to the following: a plausibly medieval-looking leather satchel, the illuminated pages, a plastic clear file, a medieval-looking knife, a prop leaf (not strictly necessary, but poetic and useful in echoing references to ‘the wood’, betrayal, and ‘gold leaf’ in scenes 9 and 10), a modern necklace and a modern pair of shoes (both for scene 9). This was a conscious experiment in exploring how much of an actual environment was useful, poetically desirable or necessary to communicate a staged narrative, evocative enough to invite an audience’s imaginative involvement whilst serving both the piece and composer well.

*Eg.2* is an extract from a document I prepared, post the 2016 semi-staging, in

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<sup>358</sup> Typically, I had one or two three-hour staging rehearsals to set the whole opera with the cast at the beginning of the period and then a further couple of calls with the orchestra where I could note the singers on staging alongside the conductor’s work. I could also give written notes to the cast after a dress rehearsal for the concert. On tour, there was usually a brief staging call in each new venue before a balance call on the day of each concert. There was very limited time and no budget for any technical or lighting effects, so each break between the parts of the opera was simply marked with a dimming of light on stage, with a black out at the end. Surtitles in the resident language, and sometimes also in English, were projected.

<sup>359</sup> The original production cast members in my 2016 semi-staging were Barbara Hannigan as Agnes, Christopher Purves as the Protector, and Victoria Simmonds as Angel 2. Tim Mead sang Angel 1/the Boy, whom I had already directed in the role during one of the co-produced revivals. Robert Murray, as Angel 3, was new to me but not to the Aix production.

advance of a staging rehearsal for the concert in 2018 as part of the Holland Festival. It served as a starting point for the singers new to this version and me to modify as we ‘put it on its feet’ in a rehearsal on the concert platform, and in relation to necessary contact with the new conductor Lawrence Renes (and limited monitors on either side at the front of the stage). Included is the plan for scene 2, which details when singers ‘become’ characters.

**Eg.2:** *CONCERT TOUR MCO - DRAFT STAGING PLAN for Holland Festival.*

All soloists enter together and go *to stand neutrally in position in front of their chairs* facing the auditorium, order from SR to SL.

SR of Lawrence from furthest SR to CS:

Krisztina (A2), Robert (A3), Tim (A1)

SL of Lawrence from CS to furthest SL:

empty chair, Audun (Pr), Georgia (Ag)

**Props** will be set as follows:

On Krisztina’s chair the Boy’s satchel; on Robert’s chair the folder, on Tim’s chair the manuscript pages. Marie’s shoes (the ‘wrong’ ones John brings in scene 9) are set under Krisztina’s chair. On the empty chair is the knife.

After entering and before the music starts: Georgia, Audun and Tim sit in their chairs. Tim picks up the manuscript pages to sit and holds them on his lap while sitting.

Satchel Folder Pages

Knife

Shoes		
<b>A2</b>	<b>A3</b>	<b>A1/Boy</b>

(Empty)	<b>Pr</b>	<b>Ag</b>

**Conductor**



## Scene One:

A2 and A3 standing. Declaration to auditorium.

A1 stand on **Fig.5** for the chord before “Erase” as declaration. Angels 2+3 ‘shatter’ text to each other then focus on A1.

**Fig.9** (after “snap back the dead to life”)

Audun and Georgia stand, becoming The Protector and Agnes.

As A3, Robert picks up and opens the folder. Tim, as A1, gives Robert the manuscript pages, putting them into the folder. As A2, Krisztina picks up the satchel and opens it. As Angels, Robert gives Krisztina the folder, putting it into the satchel. Robert then helps Tim remove his jacket and puts it over the back of Tim’s chair. Krisztina puts the satchel strap over Tim’s head so that he wears it over his shoulder.

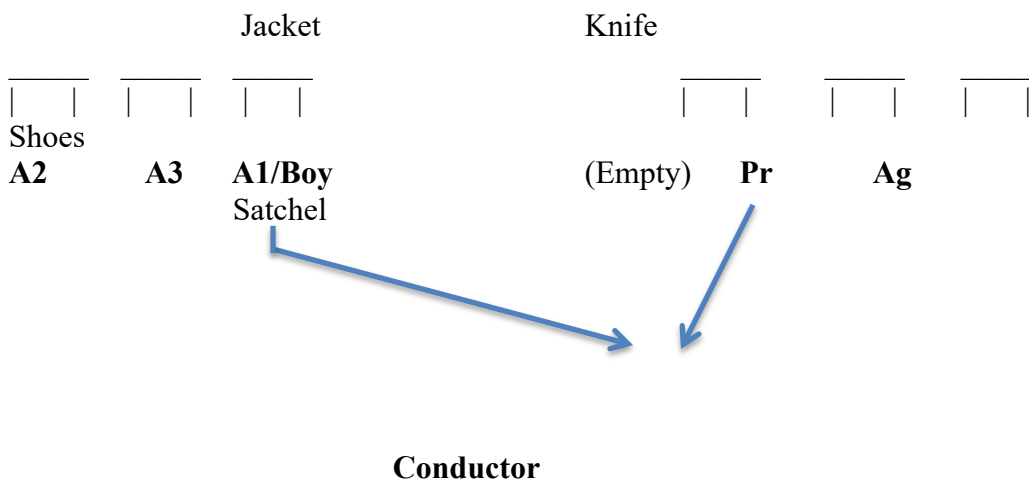
**Fig.11** (just before “the woman?”)

A1, A2 and A3 refer to Agnes and the Protector. Agnes steps down stage then sits after ‘no children’. Protector steps down stage after second ‘And the man?’.

## Scene Two:

**Fig.13** (just after “and violence”)

The Protector looks at Agnes. (Agnes sits down again) Agnes sits and watches in character. A2 and A3 sit and face out. A1 crosses, as the Boy, to SL, in front of the conductor. The Protector steps forward to greet the Boy for “Stand here” for the ‘imaginary window’ scene.





**Fig.17** (low strings instrumental, after “is my property”)

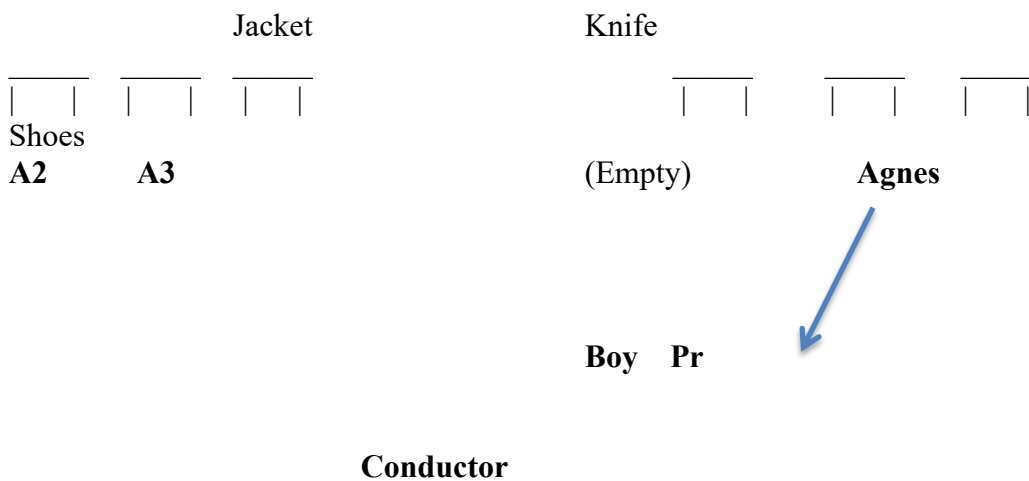
Protector walk DSL and back to Boy, in contemplation for “Make me a book”.

**Fig.21** (“The Boy takes from his satchel an illuminated page”)

Boy takes out the folder from the satchel and a page from the folder, handing it to The Protector. Adjust positions as necessary for contact with the Conductor.

**Fig.26** (“No! No! says the woman.”)

Agnes stands and walks down stage to stand beside The Protector.

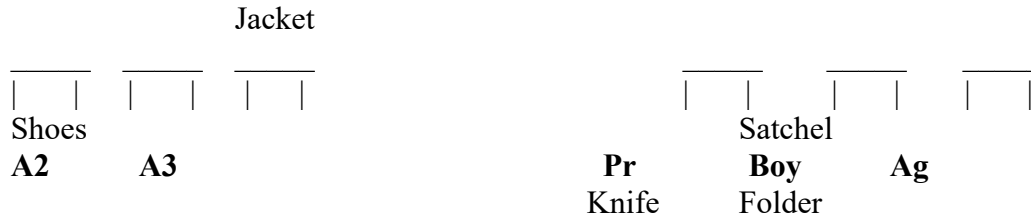


**Fig.28** (“His talents clear.”)

The Protector returns the manuscript page to the Boy, who puts it back in the folder.

**Fig.29** (after “You will welcome him into our house.”)

Protector, Boy and Agnes sit together in chairs SL. Boy in the middle, with the folder on his lap. The Boy then takes the satchel off over his head, places the satchel on the floor under his chair and holds the folder on his lap. Protector picks up the knife before sitting and then holds it, looking at it.



### Conductor

The following video extract *Eg.3* is from a recording of the concert at the Liceu in Barcelona from 2016, showing the setup of the imaginative space from the end of the first scene into the second. The Angel world is defined to the left of the conductor, from the audience's point of view, whilst the 'medieval world' is established to the conductor's right. All the singers, however, are in modern concert dress, but make adjustments to their outfits to indicate a change of character. Rather than a re-enactment, the third person narrative device is experienced thus: singers (who arrive as their 'performer' selves) on a concert platform narrate themselves embodying 'characters', in an unfolding story, told by everyone on stage, including the orchestra. A minimal visual signifying context, suggested by medieval and modern signifiers in symbolic props and adjusted 'costume' elements, was designed to have a generative effect on the imagination towards embodied sung text, and on the perception of orchestral colour and texture. Moreover, the responsibility for performance definition of character was heightened for the singers in concert, as Benjamin's compositional narrative structure deliberately avoids dealing in character motifs in favour of soundscapes. The video extract demonstrates how the opera and staging establish the contracts of reference and reality through the layering of narration, description, embodiment, enactment, illustration, and illumination.

**Eg.3:** *Video excerpt of end of Scene 1 into Scene 2.*



## **6 – Self-reflexivity and performative invention**

In contrast to the Protector, who is ‘satisfied’ with the Boy’s talent for illuminating manuscripts, Agnes dispels the visionary from the Boy’s pictures in scene 4. She ‘removes her shoes’ so as not to make a noise and approaches him in his room through a ‘stone slit’ (‘her curiosity’ transgressing the Protector’s authority) ‘to see how a book is made’. Agnes perceives a discrepancy in the Boy’s ‘invented’ illuminations with what is real and, by challenging him to ‘invent’ a woman she can believe in, he invents *her* (in Scene 6) and art crosses over into erotically charged actuality: ‘I’ve painted the woman’s heart/ No! – not “the woman” – I am Agnes. My name is Agnes.’ Here, is it art that illuminates, captures or expresses something with which Agnes identifies, becoming performative and transformative for Agnes? Or, is it Agnes that has inspired the Boy’s illumination and desire in him for her? In either reflexive instance, Agnes awakens to herself sexually, and to the sexual power she wields over others. At this point in the Aix production, Katie Mitchell directed Barbara Hannigan performing Agnes as initiating sexual contact with the Boy, and deliberately wanted to stage the first of several female orgasms. As in many intimate rehearsal negotiations there is much that is not appropriate

to share outside of that context within ethnographic practices for ethical reasons; however, it is already the case that the opera has proven robust enough to withstand other readings and interpretations.

In the context of conventions of the concert platform, for my own semi-staging under concert lighting and in concert dress, it felt conventionally inappropriate and artistically undesirable for the singers to have simulated sexual contact, therefore my solution was to stage this scene very simply, as if it were the ‘secret’ sex scene in Martin Sherman’s 1979 play *Bent*, where the singers would stand side by side and sing out, not permitted to touch one another, whilst embodying the sensuality of the music and text (the memory of the production blocking still in their bodies).<sup>360</sup> I believe this approach maintained a directness of communication with audiences, brought an intensity to the scene and the focus back on the musical form as it played into established concert conventions. Similarly, omitting acts of staged physical violence from the semi-staging and allowing the music to stir the imagination proved, I believe, preferable and more powerful in the concert setting. Furthermore, structurally evading kitsch at such moments, the opera reminds us of its self-reflexive idiom, whilst communicating the imperative for embodiment of the libretto at the end of Part 1: ‘What use to me is a picture? A picture – says Agnes – is nothing. Love’s not a picture: love is an act.’

Under the circumstances, there is at least a double meaning to the words ‘love is an act’. The (re-) enactment of (historical) events, with Angel-world interjections, play out an archetypal and ultimately gruesome love-triangle embodying and illuminating – in the broadest sense of that word – a shocking record of the workings of human desire, knowledge and power. Significantly, Angel 1’s experience of embodying the human Boy becomes an interrogation of his own ‘doubleness’ and ‘performative invention’. To what end, however, is left unanswered.

The illuminations become auto-ethnographic but variously appropriated. In scene 8, between The Protector and Agnes, the latter indicates her transgression with the Boy in

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<sup>360</sup> This idea developed into Agnes and the Boy standing pressed against one another, clasping each other’s hands as an expression of erotic charge, when Bejun Mehta and Georgia Jarman performed the roles with MCO in Hamburg and Berlin in 2018. Bejun brought a compelling ‘sluttiness’ (to use his word) to the role of the Boy/Angel 1 in his scenes with Agnes, the Protector and Marie, as well as new chemistry to the combination of singers. The entire concert in this combination of singers was recorded in Berlin and is available to watch online on the Digital Concert Hall: <https://www.digitalconcerthall.com/en/concert/51998>

an oblique reference to seeing him ‘riding out into the wood like a picture out of his own book’; in the Protector’s mind, she should not have seen any of the book’s pages. A sixteen-bar orchestral section, replete with rumbling psychological undercurrents, leads to the Protector rejecting her sexual advances as child-like, and subsequently to the more overt implication of her affair with the Boy: ‘Go to the wood. Ask him – the one who writes on skin – ask him what I am – the Boy’. Agnes asserts her identity as a sexually awakened woman, ‘not a child’ or a ‘wife’ with a ‘still and obedient body’. This marks a turning point in the narrative and signals a shift in the balance of power in the love triangle. The musical segue into scene 9 is marked *forte* and *fortissimo*, suddenly dropping in dynamic to *pianissimo* and ‘Subdued, though tense’, as the Protector arrives at the wood. In the semi-staging, I was conscious of keeping this transition visually clean and focussed (for both an audience’s benefit and not to distract the conductor or the orchestra), so the map I prepared involved a quick flurry of action completed over the louder music, followed by stillness, as in *Eg.4* below, followed by the commensurate video excerpt in *Eg.5*.

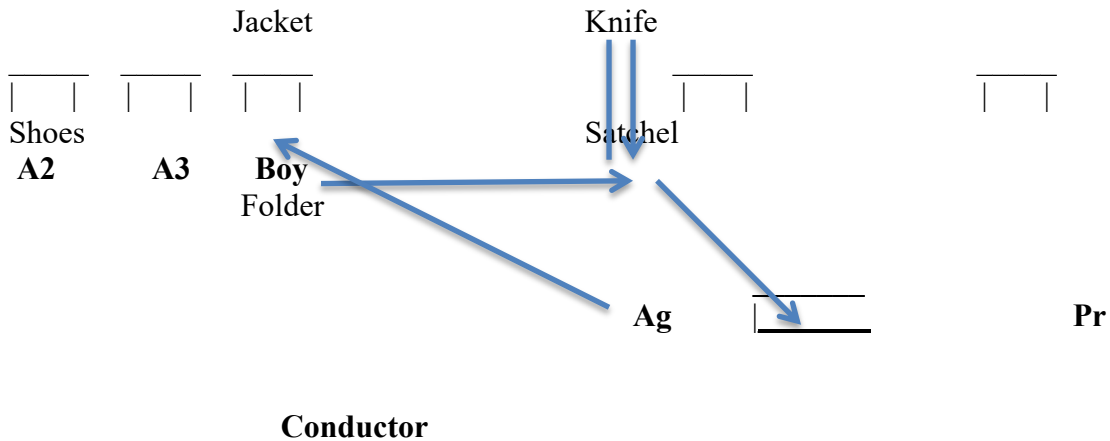
**Eg.4:** *Semi-staging advance-rehearsal plan for the transition of Scene 8 into 9.*

**Fig.29** (after “ask him what I am the Boy”)

Pr storms over to SL corner. Faces off stage left.

**Three bars before Fig.31** (crescendo instrumental chords)

Ag and Boy quickly exchange places. Boy picks up the knife from the chair and puts the folder down in its place as he travels.



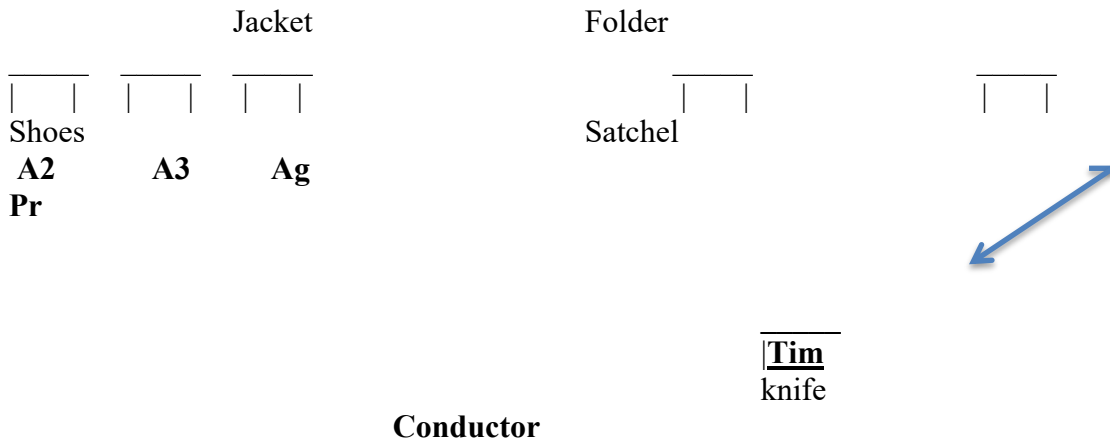
### Scene 9:

**Fig.31**

Boy facing out, holding the knife. Pr facing SL. A2, A3, Ag face out.

**Fig.32** (“He finds the Boy”)

Pr turn to look at Boy.



**Eg.5:** *Scene 9, recorded at Teatro Real in Madrid.*



In scene 9, following the Protector's emotionally ambiguous and intense questioning of the Boy, the latter invents a particularly lurid lie (theatrically 'performed' by Angel 2 and Angel 3 as Marie and John) to 'protect' Agnes and himself from the Protector's wrath. As with more timeless themes of gender politics, contemporary debates around the plausibility of reported facts, truth and authenticity are particularly resonant at this point of temporal disruption in the opera.<sup>361</sup> The Aix production staged this musically difficult scene across several rooms, playing with its own spatial and temporal conventions, adding costume changes to the challenge for singers and subsequent conductors to navigate sightlines and pick-ups. This always took a lot of time to rehearse in each of the performance venues, regardless of which singers were in the cast, or who was in the pit. George Benjamin, himself conducting, was always very aware

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<sup>361</sup> Kellyanne Conway's use of the term 'alternative facts' in a press interview to defend a false statement about the attendance numbers of Donald Trump's inauguration as President of the USA, in January 2017, spawned international controversy, adding to the notion of 'post truth' in the post-modern era, and has been linked to a spike in the sales of George Orwell's book *1984*, among other connected social phenomena. By 2018, in the light of these societal events, the opera's themes of gender politics and sexualized expressions of power seem to further resonate with media coverage of the 'oppression' of women by religious dogma ('cover your arms and hair') as well as the 'outing' of male sexual predators and their 'fall' from power in the 'me too' campaign.

of the importance of the singers' connection to the music, each other and having eye contact with him at particular moments in this scene. He described this 'magic' contact in my interview with him thus:

you're caught in a right small space, even however ambitious it is, where things are real and connected and organic and authentic. That's the word, and if you slip outside that and you're given too much freedom or you lose connection to the score or to the general flow of the music then, then everything's lost... excessive freedom in the arts is a disaster.

Keeping a tight rein on precision and clarity of definition, when it comes to interpretation, is a key concern to practitioners of contemporary opera because its forms can become very complex. This is increasingly the case under layers of self-conscious awareness of the interrelatedness of all the elements that make up opera performances.

The distilled concert staging meant that this definition needed to be as clear as possible, without the visual support of set and costume signifiers, for audiences to follow and be complicit in imagining the narrative. Without any production paraphernalia to focus or deflect an audience's attentions (other than the vivid playing of the orchestra), the pressure on the singers to remain 'connected' to both the music and scenic ideas required uninterrupted concentration and presence; they never left the stage.

In the Aix production of *Written On Skin*, the very idea of a re-enactment places an emphasis in its relation to the past on the phenomenological present. The Protector confronts the Boy in the wood and insists that he 'tell me about now, the future's easy' in scene 9. This incites the Boy to invent a lie, in which he prompts Angels 2 and 3 to embody Marie and John in a conjured, theatrical performance that exists in its own liminoid and temporal bubble. Paradoxically, this 'bubble' blurs the distinction between the defined medieval and Angelic worlds, but opens up questions about where 'the truth' lies. Here, the playful, layered and disruptive function of the liminoid investigation of social identity is once again the focus. Marie's text expresses human pretensions to power bound up in sexual politics, whilst she is being played by Angel 2, herself following the prompting, dramatically ironic 'invention' of Angel 1 as the Boy: 'I want to be Venus. Put me in the book. Illuminate, illuminate me. AH! THAT HURTS... /Then she wanted to be an Angel...'. In the semi-staged version, I asked the singers voicing Angels 2 and 3 to make adjustments to their outfits to indicate their change of character to John and Marie; whilst the 'bubble' was staged to the left of the conductor, the Protector watched



from the conductor's right. This echoed the blocking of the Aix production but was again pared back in terms of production, with a subsequent emphasis on the text, embodied characters and orchestral presence. Consequently, over the various incarnations of the semi-staging, I directed Angels 2 and 3, John and Marie as 'grotesques', heightened cabaret-like portraits, or foils to the central three characters, who were performed in a more 'naturalistic' style.

In scene 10, Agnes emotionally 'commissions' the Boy to weaponise his illuminations in a demonstration of his love for her and an act of revenge against the Protector: 'Push our love into that man's eye like a hot needle. Blind him. Blind him with it. Make him. Make him cry blood.' In this instance, an awakened female sexual force penetrates the realm of the dominant patriarchy. The repetition of 'Blind him' and 'Make him' again underline the performative relationship art has with those privileged to create and bear witness to it, again pertinent to contemporary evolutions in the visibility of sexual politics around gender and power.

The Boy's final act is to deliver the completed manuscript to the Protector in scene 11 (along with Agnes's 'Trojan horse' images). In so doing, the experience of describing Paradise causes a disruption between the temporal and character definitions of the Boy/Angel 1; modern references to 'Marie shopping in the shopping mall and John at the airport collecting air miles' bleed into the Boy's text on Paradise, the temporal conflation interpreted in the Aix production as a symptom of confusion and the toll embodying the Boy has taken on Angel 1, both mentally and physically.<sup>362</sup> His confusion is mirrored in Agnes, who cannot see the pictures of the Protector's personal Hell she wanted illuminated on the 'secret page': 'Where are the pictures?/ They're here: I've painted them with words/...How can a woman read?... What use to a woman is a word?' *Eg.6* is a recording of this moment from the performance in Barcelona.

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<sup>362</sup> In notes, after the semi-staged performance in Hamburg in 2018 with Bejun Mehta as the Angel 1/the Boy and George Benjamin himself conducting, George asked for a different inflection and take on this moment, which Bejun was able to deliver in the Berlin concert. The temporal conflation was to be a conscious and vindictive bleeding of Angel 1 into the character of the Boy in order to confuse the Protector.

**Eg.6:** Video excerpt of the end of Scene 11 (Liceu recording)



Whilst this opera foregrounds the illuminating significance of images and the ontological experience of embodiment, in scene 12 the ‘secret’ power of written words as ‘pornography’ emerges as they are read aloud for the illiterate medieval woman Agnes; given voice by her husband they illuminate the Boy’s/Angel 1’s auto-ethnography of the human heart, along with Agnes’s tortured pleasure and the Protector’s pain. In this instance, the Boy’s self-documenting of his affair with Agnes *in words* paints a descriptive picture of the Protector’s personal Hell in the mind’s eye. This scene is an example of how, in the broader context of contemporary cultural theories around realism, such artefacts – textual or illuminated – may be read as leaving traces of the cultural forces and narratives that shape them, are expressions of personal experience and thus enlivened by their power of affect in our encounter with them.<sup>363</sup> Because Agnes is illiterate, this scene also critiques the development of literary theory’s methods of reading ‘cultural text’ as a privileged encoded grammar, and in the light of contemporary sexual politics, instead favours the performativity of language and the voice to shape human social interaction. In the Aix production, the scene was staged at a table, culminating with Agnes lying on top of it in a state of frustrated sexual arousal. For the semi-staged

<sup>363</sup> See Jameson, F., *Antinomies of Realism*, London: Verso (2013).

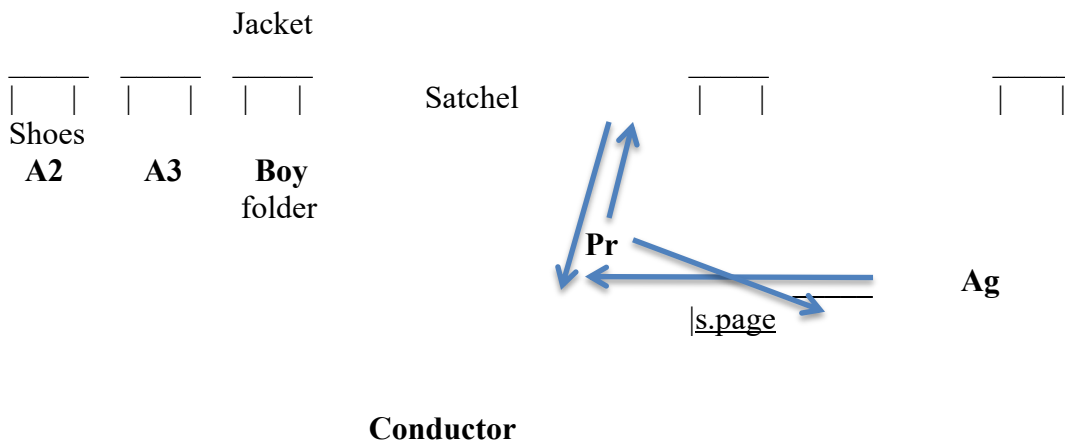
concert performance, neither was there room for a table nor was this appropriate to my hybrid approach. Instead, below is a record of how I planned to stage the scene, which I was then able to note in rehearsal with the singers in order to finesse it. The close proximity but lack of physical contact between the singers was designed to increase dramatic tension in the scene, giving greater significance to the written ‘secret page’ as an object of power, illumination and oppression:

**Eg.7:** *Semi-staging rehearsal plan of scene 12.*

### **Scene 12:**

**Fig.17** (9 bars before “mouth – see it – mouth – writes the Boy”)

Protector picks up the secret page then steps US to bring the chair he was sitting on DS next to the other DS chair (as below), Pr stares at Ag for her to sit in it. **3 bars before Fig.18** Pr then sits in the off stage chair while holding the pages and pointing to the words. The scene plays out with them sitting until...

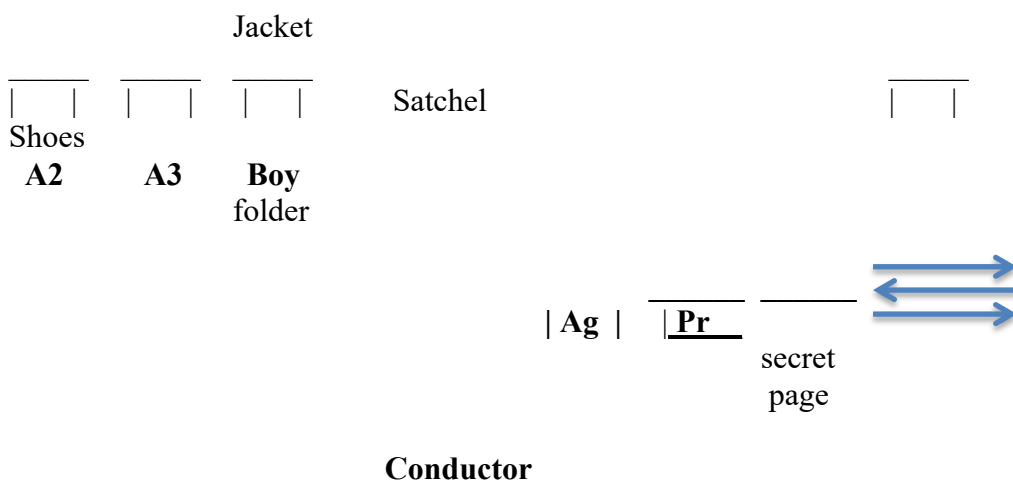


**3 bars after Fig.26** (“Read it-“)

On the chords after “Read it-“ Protector stands pulling away from Ag. Pr pointedly puts page on chair for the second “keep away”.

**Fig.27** (“I want to see./Cover your arms.”)

Pr position USL of Ag stay in the chair holding onto the back of the SL chair. Pr point at Ag for “cover your face and hair” then pace away SL, returning for “Stitch shut your lips” and Ag picks up the page on the chair on the sung top ‘A’ before “oh please please”. Pr storms SL after last “keep away from me” to stand far SL, facing off stage. Ag clasps page between both hands.



**Eg.8:** *Scene 12 video excerpt.*



## **7 –Who to believe and how to behave**

In another permutation of the performativity of language, Scene 13 casts the voices of Angels 2 and 3 as either puppet masters or critics of those who manipulate the human world (depending on whether they are voicing their own desires or ‘performing’ their text as citation), insinuating the Protector’s contradictory impulses (‘Put voices into his mind’). Philosophically, this raises perennial questions about the role of the individual to choose their path in the face of external deterministic factors, and resonates with contemporary social debates around individual responsibility, radicalisation and governance. Ultimately, the Protector voices his ‘freewill’ to choose a mixture of desire and violence over mercy in a way that once again reminds us of the liminoid and specular relationship of art to life: ‘Take his hair in your fist – says the third – pull his head back for a kiss: and as you are cutting one long clean incision through the bone examine your own portrait in the glass black mirror of his eyes’. Significantly, the Protector’s own values are reflected back at him in the Boy’s eyes, rather than those that had seduced him, such as the mercy that he had seen illuminated in the Boy’s example work.

The murder of the Boy, in a thunderous orchestral interlude, inevitably poses staging questions: what do we hear, what do we see, what do we imagine? Dramaturgically, the music tells us everything we need to know. Whatever choices are made about what is shown or illustrated in the staging seem redundant unless they drive forward the metanarrative, or agenda of the production. In Aix, the Boy was dispatched quickly and efficiently carried off stage, followed by a flurry of cleaning, prop and furniture choreography by Angel archivists in preparation for Scene 14 (in which the Protector feeds Agnes the Boy’s heart). As a production team we discussed our concerns about this approach in the making of it, namely that the visual shouldn’t try to compete with or attempt to match the scale of the music as this might weaken both at this point in the opera; however, I think what we did achieve was a certain tension and expectation of further violence and horror, under a veil of stage managed efficiency. Meanwhile in an upstairs room, the bloodied Boy was ‘reborn’ as Angel 1, with a vaguely homoerotic, slow motion change of clothes, assisted by a half-naked, wing-tattoo-backed, non-singing angel archivist. For the semi-staging, without any of the set, it felt more appropriate to showcase the orchestra, and so at significant moments in the score I choreographed the

singers to turn upstage to face them, which served to signify the death of the character of the Boy. In Amsterdam, for the Festival of Holland performance in 2018, it was possible to light the textured back wall of the Musiekgebouw behind the orchestra rather atmospherically from the start, and so I give it a blood-red wash of colour for the murder, which I think added enough visual drama without becoming overly produced or vulgar within the starker aesthetic of the concert platform.

I semi-staged Scene 14 very simply with Agnes seated facing the audience, as if at an imaginary table, with the Protector hovering over her until Agnes's final defiant aria, for which she stood, close to the conductor, and sung out to the audience as a concert number. The Protector receded from the scene to sit, as a 'neutral' performer. Again, it felt inappropriate to the concert platform environment to try to replicate the physical violence or experiments in slow motion from the Aix production. Although the memory of these was still in the singers' motivational maps and bodies, and certainly registered in Barbara Hannigan's delivery of Agnes's final aria, gradually returning to concert convention staging was designed to bring both cast and audience's consciousness back to their actual environment, dissolving the illusion of a specific imaginative space. My intention was to present an iconic level of defiance to the figure of Agnes, which I believed Barbara Hannigan would embody.

## **8 – Auto-ethnography and performativity**

In the first edition of the published vocal score of *Written On Skin*, it is the Boy who voices the text for what is labelled the 'third miniature: the woman falling', in the last of the opera's 15 scenes. The 'first miniature' is described by the Boy in Scene 2 as 'a work of mercy'; it is the example of his work that captures the Protector's imagination. The 'second miniature: a house in winter' is described in Scene 6 and marks another turning point in the relationships between the three main characters, where Agnes and the Boy first consummate their illicit affair. In the world premiere production in Aix, during the course of rehearsals and following through with the episodic temporal logic of the production's approach to a re-enactment, it was agreed that the text in Scene 15 should be performed by Angel 1 rather than the Boy, thus changing the libretto from 'This, says the Boy' to 'This, says the *Angel*'. Appearing *deus ex machina*, Angel 1 (reborn) would then

interrupt the temporal flow of violence and defiance between Agnes and the Protector at the end of Scene 14.

Thus, Angel 1 describes the illumination of the falling woman silhouetted by the night sky, as he holds aloft the final page in ‘the illuminated book of history’. The Aix production staging of Scene 15 conflated both modern and medieval worlds; the other Angels moved through an imagined temporal membrane to intercept Agnes as she escaped further violence from the knife-wielding Protector, performed in slow motion simultaneous to Angel 1’s ‘real time’ sung text. In the wide-set version of the production, Agnes climbed a flight of modern stairs, in slow motion, while Angel 1 lay down on one of the modern archive tables as the curtain was brought in over the orchestral play out; thus, the production poetically implied the apotheosis of Agnes and a diminished Angelic presence. In the reduced-set version, where there were no modern stairs to stage left, our solution devised in Toulouse (touring to Vienna, Munich, and Paris) was to continue to illustrate Angel 1’s text in slow motion, so that we saw Agnes exit stage left, then reappear upstairs, pursued by the Protector and the other angels, witnessing her climb onto the ledge of the upstage window in order to jump. We tried a number of end image options, around when to bring the curtain in, that continued to shift the production’s emphasis on tour.

In my semi-staged version, where slow motion once again felt conventionally inappropriate, Scene 15 was played so that each of the singers progressively stood to visualise Angel 1’s final illumination facing the audience, so that all were standing in a line by the end of the opera, conflating concert and music theatre conventions by projecting the imaginative world out into the audience. This also deliberately avoided elevating or diminishing any of the opera’s characters, or indeed the delicate matter of cast members where there are roles of similar weight; rather, this directorial choice privileged the ensemble, which felt more appropriate as a showcase primarily for the orchestra and how they are conventionally acknowledged by the conductor at the end of concert performances all together, and then by section. I choreographed two ensemble bows before the conductor and cast exited, followed by calls for individual singers, conductor and orchestral sectionals. A third ensemble bow followed, with continued applause, adopted at the Holland Festival in 2018 when the performance was conducted

by Lawrence Renes, as an opportunity to invite George Benjamin onto the stage, who had been watching in the audience (for the first time in concert). This must have been a unique kind of liminoid experience for him, as much as it was a nervous one for me, about which he was exceptionally kind and generous. Needless to say, I have been greatly encouraged in my creative practice by his endorsement.

In Hamburg, in the sold-out 2100 seat Elbphilharmonie main hall, with its ascending, wrap around, vineyard-inspired balconies on all sides of the concert platform, I modified the semi-staging so that the scenes played across stage as well as ‘out’ to audiences in front and behind the orchestra. George Benjamin conducted and Martin Crimp was in the audience, for the first time experiencing the opera in a version other than Katie Mitchell’s production. Following the performance and a ten-minute ovation, at the MCO sponsors’ reception event afterwards Martin Crimp commented publicly on the experience as having ‘exploded his attachment’ to the Aix-en-Provence production. I experienced this as humbling praise indeed, and very cannily performed for an audience of sponsors from a career perspective, particularly ahead of the revival of Benjamin and Crimp’s third collaboration *Lessons in Love and Violence* at Hamburg Opera later in the season.

On reflection, in the world premiere production of the opera *Written On Skin*, Angel 1’s experience of embodying the life and death of the Boy leads to a revised ending of the thus far re-enacted record of history, and a repositioning of those complicit in its telling. The liminoid re-enactment of the central story has therefore been a liminal experiment for Angel-kind. The final illumination becomes ‘historical’ in that it is ‘materially inscribed’<sup>364</sup> as a result of ‘a displacement of being that challenges our notion of history’, to refer back to McKenzie in the epigraph of this chapter. In a mutation of the conventional tradition of an epilogue, *Written On Skin* can be seen to directly address the terms of its own internal referential and reality contracts, and by so doing, I suggest, invites us as makers and audiences to address our own relationship to the opera. *Written On Skin* is thus an example of cultural performance that displays an awareness of its own cultural performativity.

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<sup>364</sup> In *Marxism and Form*, Fredric Jameson makes the distinction between cultural artifacts as leaving traces of history rather than ‘being’ history themselves, but the important point here is that the telling of history has been embodied anew, and ‘materially inscribed’ anew as a result.



One of the central questions posed by the opera *Written On Skin* is: who is in control of the narrative? The power and ability to tell stories, indeed, to choose which stories to tell, how they are told and whom they oppress or privilege would seem to be at the heart of the opera's concerns, as well as those of the performance paradigm itself. Within the opera the very documenting of stories is performative: the Boy's example page of his skill as an illuminator leads to the Protector's commissioned book (as a high-status artifact in its own right and a vision of the ideological 'rightful place' afforded his family), the Boy's depiction and invocation of 'a woman that's real' in Agnes, his 'secret page' of pornographic knowledge 'painted with words' that precipitate 'human disaster', and the Angel's final intervention in the unfolding of narrated time and apotheosis of Agnes.

## **9 – Cartographies of the liminoid**

On creating a production staging of the opera, the 'production book' is a documenting of the opera's embodied performance. This is variously compiled of a production team's auto-ethnographic preparatory notes and research made on studying the score, rehearsal maps, and video recordings, in an attempt to document the simultaneous movements and motivations of everyone and everything onstage, as well as the cueing of lights and technical effects at moments in the score, or following visual cues. These are cartographies of the liminoid. The production book is not only a record of the show but a working map: for the deputy stage manager to call the technical cueing of performances, and of future revivals in which performers (and directors) must embody their own imaginative truth and motivations for committing to pathways created by others. Revivals, co-production re-presentations, the covering of roles and now semi-staged concerts form a major part of many opera singers' careers, as well as a director's, such as my own. The quality of these production maps and their skillful navigation has a very real impact on practitioners and audiences' experiences of opera as an art form, for better or worse.

Within the academic sphere, post-structuralists such as Foucault and Derrida (and cultural studies as a discipline) have positioned everything as text to be deconstructed, analysed and 'performed', which has also gained purchase within the discipline of

musicology. In this light, my own text is a mapping of my involvement in liminal processes and is in the performative vein of asserting Practice as Research as a legitimate research methodology within the Academy's hierarchy. As McKenzie points out, and to use Ingold's terminology once again, Anglo-American anthropologist theorists of Performance Studies that focus on practicalities are 'entwined' with, whilst reacting against such text-focused paradigms of epistemology.<sup>365</sup> Central to McKenzie's thesis is Jean-François Lyotard's idea of a postmodern paradigm of knowledge that serves 'efficiency' rather than the 'grand narratives' of earlier periods 'socially legitimated by arguments that their truths served the progress of humanity, the revolution of the working class, and/or the liberation of historically oppressed groups'.<sup>366</sup> The emergence of postmodern knowledge, according to McKenzie's reading, 'marks the decline of grand narratives within academic and public discourse and the growing hegemony of computer technologies. Significantly, Lyotard names this postmodern legitimation "performativity"'.<sup>367</sup> With regard to the opera *Written On Skin*, the Aix production's treatment of its themes would seem to resonate with the decline of grand narratives (such as in the death of God), as would the opera's rather nostalgic episodic structure; yet, its focus on a simple human story, and how it is told, is perhaps more aligned with Auslander's notion of performativity, which concerns presence and resistance, bringing together materialist concerns and a theatrical tradition for exposing the workings of power and oppression within society.<sup>368</sup>

## 10 – From defiance to resistance and pragmatic performance

Auslander identifies a shift from transgression to resistance in postmodern performance that McKenzie reformulates as two different strategies of his 'performativity efficacy' within 'cultural performance':

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<sup>365</sup> McKenzie characterizes Performance Studies theorists as seeing language as derivative from behaviour in such ideas as L.D. Conquergood's 'return of the body' and Michael Jackson's 'radical empiricism'. I see a resonance here with *Written On Skin* in the way that Angel 1 embodies the Boy, and the way the Aix production interpreted this as an attempt to comprehend 'human disaster' in order to illuminate it.

<sup>366</sup> McKenzie, J. *Perform or Else*, p.14 about Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. (1979)

<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

<sup>368</sup> Auslander, P. *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism in Cultural Politics and Contemporary American Performance* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

Transgressive efficacy posits itself as a presence outside an alienating power, taking its position in opposition to dominant social structures and forms. By contrast, resistant efficacy arises from within, necessarily inscribed within the very forces of power whose arrangement of presence and absence it seeks to challenge. The difference between these strategies corresponds also to a difference in the ways power is conceived: while transgressive efficacy seeks to overthrow the totalitarianism of the Establishment, resistant efficacy seeks to subvert the hegemonies of ethnophallogocentrism. Auslander argues that postmodern performance does not attempt to oppose social norms and institutions but instead infiltrates them through subtle critiques and/or parodies of representational media.<sup>369</sup>

In *Written On Skin*, Angel 1's embodiment of the Boy in the human story could be seen as a form of McKenzie's resistant efficacy (to the power governing the Angelic world) in contrast to Agnes's transgressive efficacy (to governance by the Protector). Both result in death. Agnes's suicide is in defiance of the Protector, and oppressive religious dogma, by implication; she becomes a feminist martyr in Katie Mitchell's production. Angel 1's death as the Boy would seem resistant to an absent power (God) and a critique of that absent power's own human incarnation in the historical Jesus story, made present through reference to the virtues of 'mercy', 'Judas' as well as to Old Testament 'invented' figures such as Eve. On a structural level, while the opera avoids the use of character motifs as a 'modern' compositional feature in favour of soundscapes that evoke scenic and psychological tensions, the use of third person narrative in the libretto creates layers of self-consciously embodied performance in postmodern ethnographic 'text of the physical, the spoken and the performed'.<sup>370</sup>

Both Carlson and McKenzie acknowledge the politicised and liminal nature of the performance paradigm. McKenzie's formulation asserts: 'those for whom performance means liminality, subversion, and resistance, this challenge reads: Perform—or else: be socially normalized.'<sup>371</sup> In other words, tell your own story, or be subsumed by dominant conventional discourse and performative narratives generated by others.

In a later published interview for *ephemerajournal.org*, McKenzie poses another question that pertains to Carlson's third category of cultural performance, which has motivated my own practice as research endeavours:

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<sup>369</sup> McKenzie, J. *Perform or Else*, p.43

<sup>370</sup> Tyler, S. *The Unspeakable: Discourse, Dialogue and Rhetoric in the Post Modern World* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p.225, quoted in Carlson, M. *Performance*, p.209.

<sup>371</sup> McKenzie, J. *Perform or Else*, p.9

...maybe it is not called performance, but this drive for assessment, this audit society is part of that. Artists have gone from legitimating themselves through these grand narratives of liberation and freedom to becoming increasingly under audit themselves. I think there is good and bad in this, and the question is what are the modes of resistance that are going to emerge under performativity?<sup>372</sup>

McKenzie attempts to find agency in resistance to normativity through the playful ‘puncept’ (conflating the shifting meaning of the pun with a concept). Inspired by Derrida, McKenzie coins the term ‘perfumance’: performance combines with perfume arising from the ‘citational mist’ of a continuously mutating, postmodern sense of meaning. Although deliberately ambiguous and successfully evading systems of measurement in theory, I find in practice, where choices eventually need to be made, this form of resistance can remain nebulous and unsatisfyingly non-committal.

My own preferred performative strategy for combatting the neo-liberal model takeover (of assessment and performance measurement) is informed by holistic concepts with a pragmatic focus on dialogic interaction, along with redrawing the boundaries and lines of the ‘self’. To my mind, these resonate with the practice in daily life of Buddhist teachings, with which I am more familiar, and to creative practices that expand the conception of the self by using our perceptual capacity to imagine ‘other’ selves, manifesting compassion, forging and awakening to connections with others. In recent critical theory, Den Tandt identifies and articulates the formation of a new pragmatist paradigm of realism thus:

...the prominence within Anglo-Saxon cultural studies of theorists such as Antonio Gramsci, Mikhail Bakhtin, or, more recently, Pierre Bourdieu testifies to the researchers’ willingness to define a pragmatist middle way between the older reflectionist Marxist models of base and superstructure and, on the other hand, the postmodern view that texts have a life of their own, irrespective of determinate subjects or assignable meanings. The pragmatist turn I wish to describe no longer assumes that a realist text - hence a politically progressive one, according to Lukács - should offer a fully validated cognitive map of its object. Instead, its realist potential is measured by its ability to foster the empowerment of disenfranchised constituencies by any textual means available in a given cultural context. This reconfiguration of realism therefore boils down to a shift between two meanings of the term ‘realist’ - from referential accuracy and exhaustiveness to pragmatist efficiency, from the true to the possible.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>372</sup> See ‘Revisiting Jon McKenzie’s *Perform or else*: performance, labour and pedagogy’, interview transcript with Jon McKenzie, Tim Edkins and Stephen Shukaitis from [www.ephemerajournal.org](http://www.ephemerajournal.org) volume 14(3): 525-543.

<sup>373</sup> Den Tandt, C, ‘Cultural Studies and the Realist Paradigm: from Lukács to Neo-Pragmatism’ in *Literature and Society: The Function of Literary Sociology in Comparative Literature*, eds. Bart Keunen and Bart Eeckhout (Bruxelles: P.I.E-Peter Lang, 2001), p.113-131.

Following this pragmatic shift within the context of creative practice, I see a convergence between the ambitions that drive the ‘reality bet’ of a dialogical realism<sup>374</sup> with the performance of ‘imaginative truth’ on stage.<sup>375</sup> This resonates with Dhunpath and Samuel’s category of ontological truth that is restorative, transcending structure and prioritising ‘agency’ in the realm of the social and in service to others.<sup>376</sup> This level of truth has a performative dimension in that it involves communing with a ‘greater self’ to envision other possible, plausible realities, and nurture faith in that vision to come into being. In my experience of making opera, the ‘truth of faith’ in creating with others combines an internal struggle of competing impulses requiring sustained self-discipline, diligent focus and skilful listening to navigate - becoming manifest externally, entwined and in correspondence with the material world. From a Buddhist perspective, this is very close to applying the ‘strategy of the Lotus Sutra’, which places primary importance on the inner transformation of the tenets we hold in our hearts, in order to affect change in the material manifestation of our vision for and understanding of reality.

At this point in my own career in opera, my experience of practice as research is as a ‘return’ to self-reflexivity in the context of thinking about my situation in the world, not only in creative practice but in the twenty-first century work-life balance of those that are mindful of holoreflexivity<sup>377</sup> and interconnectedness: ‘we may do actions unthinkingly, but when we think about them, this brings in a consciousness that gives them the quality of performance’.<sup>378</sup> Consciousness of the correspondence between internal-external, private and public experiences increasingly informs my own creative practice as a director of situated opera performances. Aspiring to critical awareness, my

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<sup>374</sup> Den Tandt, C, *On Virtual Grounds: Blueprint for a Postmimetic Dialogical Realism*, (2015)

<sup>375</sup> ‘Truth on stage is whatever we can believe in with sincerity, whether in ourselves or in our colleagues. Truth cannot be separated from belief, nor belief from truth.’ C. Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, (England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1967) p. 122-123. First published in USSR 1926. For an audience to maintain the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’, imaginative truth must be consistent and robust enough to withstand the practicalities of the operatic form, such as: its heightened idiom, singers and orchestral players maintaining contact with the conductor, as well as other current and evolving performance conventions, determined to an extent in opera by the performance space and venue.

<sup>376</sup> Beyond the forensic search for positivist facts, the personal truth of experience and the dialogic truth sought by a critical realist’s approach, Dhunpath and Samuel detail a fourth category of ontological truth, found in belief, that is performative and restorative. See R. Dhunpath and M Samuel (eds), *Life History Research: Epistemology, Methodology and Representation* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009)

<sup>377</sup> Holoreflexivity refers to consciousness of issues around identity, global citizenship and environmental ecology.

<sup>378</sup> Carlson, M. *Performance*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (2004), p.4.

own performativity exists in dynamic tension between the assertion of deeply felt values and beliefs and those that are conventional, dominant or normalizing. We may all entertain self-contradictory impulses; nevertheless, as practitioners and audience members, engaging with cultural performances of works such as *Written On Skin*, which focus on the liminoid, is an invitation to raise our self-awareness in correspondence with how such works are embodied, interpreted and presented. Exploring and experiencing the liminoid together with others, therefore, is a path to discovering possible ‘truths’ about ourselves.

## **11 – My experience of audiences: reflections on intercultural encounter**

The latest tour of *Written On Skin*, in my semi-staged version, was with Lawrence Renes conducting the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra at the Poly Theatre for the opera’s Asian premiere at the Beijing Music Festival and to the Shanghai Symphony Hall in October 2018. Shortly after this, it was performed again in November 2018 with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra, conducted by the newly knighted George Benjamin at the Hamburg Elbphilharmonie, and Berlin Philharmonie where Benjamin was resident for a season as both guest composer and conductor. Meanwhile, I was in attendance as stage director because of changes in casting and venue and took the opportunity to observe both performers and audiences at the concerts, in my double identity as ethnographer.

As a company of visiting European and American artists to China, we were splendidly accommodated and rehearsed in Shanghai for a week, in the ex-colonial French quarter of the city where the impressive new Shanghai Symphony Hall is located. As a European myself, this area of Shanghai struck me on two levels that resonated with the opera we were presenting: the street and the sky. The French quarter is unusual in the city for its plane tree-lined streets and low-level boutique shops and housing, somewhat reminiscent of Provence in France, popular now with an ex-pat Japanese and South Korean community. My singer colleagues, who had already sung in China, had been concerned about the air quality prior to our arrival in Shanghai, particularly as we came in to land through smog. But the weather quickly proved to be very fine the entire period and there was no discernable difference in pollution at street level from any major European city. Nevertheless, the flow of petrol and electric vehicles seemed as relentless

as the ubiquitous smell of cigarette smoke in the streets. The most striking feature of the city to me is its densely packed skyline of relentless high-rise, and LED-lit buildings, most of which provide housing for the more than 24 million people that live in Shanghai – the Earth’s largest and most densely populated city. I was intrigued by the juxtaposition of these two levels to the city, and of the stereotype of the ancient (or historical) and modern existing side by side in an Asian metropolis. What would people living here make of this opera?

I was able to canvass opinion informally in conversation from some of the SSO company members about *Written On Skin* during our time working together and, less guardedly, at the end of our stay in China. Contemporary opera is not their usual repertoire; nevertheless, the accompanying programme note on the orchestra’s history details their commitment to a breadth of repertoire, aspiring musical standards and outward facing vision (albeit with a hint and tone of state propaganda):

Notably under the baton of the Italian conductor Mario Paci, the orchestra promoted Western music and trained Chinese young talents very early in China, and introduced the first Chinese orchestral work to the audience, hence reputed as ‘the best in the Far East’... After 139 year history (sic), the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra will continue to always practice its mission – ‘Music Connecting Worlds’. Therefore, SSO has become the promoter and builder of East-West cultural exchanges and Asian music education, and continues a three-century-old glorious dream.<sup>379</sup>

Less officious opinion from within the youthful artistic and technical support staff in Shanghai seemed to regard the opera with some suspicion; they still cited Classical and Romantic repertoire as where their tastes lay in Western classical music. When asked the broad question of ‘what did they make of the opera and its story?’ the remarks were striking to me, as there were no comments on any of its ‘postmodern’ features. The performances of Angels 2 and 3 as Marie and John were noted – I surmise because they were heightened, characterful and at times ‘comedic’, and therefore perhaps more readily legible to audiences of ‘other’ cultures – while the vocal writing and casting of the Boy as a counter-tenor was singled out as ‘impressive’ and ‘foreign’. A parallel was drawn between the central story and old Chinese stories that warned against the devastating effects of committing adultery. From the small sample of those with whom I spoke, the overwhelming impression of the opera was therefore, seemingly, as a ‘violent’ morality

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<sup>379</sup> Extract taken from the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra programme for George Benjamin’s *Written On Skin* Chinese Premiere (Semi-staged version), 2018.10.25.

tale. This is perhaps unsurprising given the backdrop of an oppressive Chinese political narrative we are used to in the West. Yet, an American-Chinese couple in their late twenties, who attended as my guests in Shanghai (never having been to an opera of any kind), were full of enthusiasm and gratitude for having taken the opportunity ‘to discover’ the art form. The demographic of the audience in Shanghai, from an unscientific scan of the two-thirds-filled auditorium, was mostly Asian of very mixed ages. Their behaviour during the concert observed Western protocol, which was noticeably not the case in Beijing.

At the Asian premiere performance in Beijing, brought about largely through the efforts of Lady Linda Wong Davies and the KT Wong Foundation,<sup>380</sup> I was asked to attend a pre-performance ‘Masterclass: in conversation’ event in front of a paid-for print media and Chinese TV audience, curated by Lady Davies and the newly appointed BMF Artistic Director Shuang Zou. Under the Festival’s theme of ‘East meets West’, the chairing of the press conference and subsequent questions focused on the cultural encounter with features of interest about the score, such as: instrumentation, the story and how it is told, as well as my directorial approach in semi-staging the opera.<sup>381</sup> There was also a showing of a filmed interview with George Benjamin in the theatre before the performance on screens at either side of the stage.<sup>382</sup> In this sense, the Beijing performance felt very carefully curated and highly ‘produced’. I was aware of post-performance interviews and feedback with audiences that had been scheduled for performances of other European works at the festival but, regrettably, this did not happen with *Written On Skin*.

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<sup>380</sup> See <https://www.ktwong.org>

<sup>381</sup> The orchestration of the glass harmonica and viola da gamba, as well as other unusual percussion instruments piqued interest among journalists during questions. I was also able to share that mandolins had been substituted for the Chinese equivalent instrument, the Liu Qin, in this performance with the SSO, but omitted sharing the reason for this was a frustrating ‘miscommunication’ between the conductor and SSO management.

<sup>382</sup> The filmed interview with George Benjamin was commissioned by the KT Wong Foundation and is available on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=45&v=OxTBcWPdf6A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=45&v=OxTBcWPdf6A)



*BMF Press Conference. (Photograph by KT Wong Director Maurice Whittaker.)*



It was the audience's behaviour during the performance, however, and how that was 'managed' by the venue and festival organisers that I found most striking. Many of the audience members had mobile phones and tablets on throughout the performance: filming it, taking 'selfies', texting or on social media, from what I could observe from the lighting box at the back of the stalls (where I had to cue the minimal light changes myself). This was 'moderated' by event staff with red-light laser pens that were pointed at and danced over individual screens from higher up in the theatre, as a means of trying to limit the audience's screen usage. It also seemed common audience behaviour to enter and leave the auditorium during the performance, as this did not appear to be managed in the way concerts are conventionally outside China, with front of house clearance staff and ushers. In spite of these 'distractions' to my eye and the performers' eyes, the

audience reception to the concert was enthusiastic and warm.<sup>383</sup> Indeed, attendees of the Beijing concert from outside of China have subsequently expressed interest in supporting further incarnations of this semi-staging of the opera,<sup>384</sup> and at the after-party there was enthusiastic appreciation from faculty members of the Beijing Conservatoire, among others. Needless to say, during our time in Beijing, our host Lady Davies royally entertained the conductor, cast and me: hospitality high on the agenda.

The concert in Hamburg's extraordinary Elbphilharmonie on November 10<sup>th</sup> 2018 was memorable and remarkable for a number of reasons. Firstly, Evan Hughes (an American baritone) was the youngest Protector, according to George Benjamin, to have sung the role thus far professionally. He had sung it once before in concert (but not off copy) with Benjamin conducting at the Tanglewood Festival in Massachusetts, several years prior to the concerts in Germany. Rehearsing Evan into the role during the 5 days leading up to the concert was, he reported to me, the most demanding and exhilarating experience of his career thus far. Angel 1/the Boy was reprised by the celebrated countertenor Bejun Mehta, who had created the role in the opera's world premiere production in Aix in 2012 but had not sung it since. Bejun confided in me that he found the experience of the semi-staged concert very different to what he was expecting, partly being in role on-stage all the time and in the levels of concentration that were required to not make musical mistakes.<sup>385</sup> From my point of view, I found his creative contribution to be collaborative, exciting and certainly supportive of my work with Georgia (Agnes) and Evan (the Protector).

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<sup>383</sup> Performers reported looking out to faces lit by screens and dancing red lights in the darkness of the auditorium, however, were not unduly distracted from performing what we had rehearsed.

<sup>384</sup> As the BMF is an international festival, it attracts interest from around the world. Consequently, the combination of interest in the opera and the career of Lawrence Renes (as a half-Maltese conductor) has led to discussions of the semi-staging being booked for the Valetta Festival in Malta.

<sup>385</sup> As a perfectionist, Bejun also confessed to having made far more musical mistakes than he normally does, which doubtless only George Benjamin and the cast noticed, but which he found very unnerving.

*The Elbphilharmonie building in Hamburg (own photograph).*



The combination of two new-to-this-version cast members and very little rehearsal time, with three who were well rehearsed, I believe, brought new risks and life with them that made the concert compelling to witness. You could have heard a proverbial pin drop in the huge, capacity-filled auditorium in Hamburg during the quietest passages, and with an audience who were predominantly there as tourists of the building, not necessarily aware that they were coming to a concert of contemporary opera in English.<sup>386</sup> We managed to project surtitles (for the first time since the building opened in 2017) in German onto the walls on two sides of the auditorium, which I believe together with a more ‘open to all sides’ staging made the opera more accessible to a very mixed audience. Beyond gauging the atmosphere on the night, which was extraordinary

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<sup>386</sup> This I surmised, having attended a concert in the venue earlier in the week, with Kent Negano conducting a mixed programme that concluded with Beethoven’s iconic Pastoral Symphony, when the audience broke with international concert protocol and applauded at the end of the first movement. It would seem that many tourists purchase tickets in order to attend a concert in the building (not necessarily because of interest in or familiarity with the musical programme, or the conventions of classical music concerts).



in my experience for its focus of attention and minimal coughing, there was unfortunately nothing in place to assess what audience members took from it; doubtless the building itself made an indelible impression, but it is my hope that the audience got more than they had expected, judging from a ten minute ovation at the end (notable even in Germany).<sup>387</sup>

The Berlin Philharmonie impresses through its historical and cultural significance in the architectural and musical life of Berlin, and is hallowed ground to classical musicians more generally, as home to one of the world's most celebrated orchestras and the Digital Concert Hall.<sup>388</sup> It is in this light that I noted different attitudes towards the concert in Berlin on November 12<sup>th</sup> 2018 from within the cast. Bejun Mehta and Evan Hughs, who both live in Berlin, were coming to the stage from different ends of the career spectrum: for Bejun it was like coming home to a venue and discerning audience he is very comfortable with, whereas for Evan it was his first performance at the Berlin Philharmonie and therefore a big step up the career ladder. A group of his friends and colleagues came to support and applaud him at the end, which was noticeable and heartening. The rest of the cast seemed to me to be professionally focused, albeit under extra pressure from George Benjamin, who was especially keen for it to be as musically accurate as possible (so less 'dramatic' risks to be taken), given that the concert was to be live-streamed and recorded for the Digital Concert Hall.<sup>389</sup> I was conscious of the prestige attached to the venue as a beautiful, acoustically fabulous concert platform; however, it is a tricky space in which to stage opera, with a very small area for the singers to move about in, with audience on all sides at unusual angles. There is also a web of microphones suspended above the stage, mounted along the front of the stage and cameras positioned to catch every conceivable angle, tangibly adding to the pressure to perform at the highest level, recorded for posterity.

For my own part, I was introduced to the Intendant (managing director) of the venue (Andrea Zietzschmann) before the performance, where she expressed her curiosity

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<sup>387</sup> For more information about the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg visit: <https://www.elbphilharmonie.de/en/elbphilharmonie>, or watch this promo on Youtube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=42&v=hL0urjtRPwQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=42&v=hL0urjtRPwQ)

<sup>388</sup> For a virtual tour of the auditorium in Berlin visit: <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/philharmonie/virtual-tour/>

<sup>389</sup> See the full concert online at: <https://www.digitalconcerthall.com/en/concert/51998>

as to what the ‘staging’ might be. My lasting impression of our brief exchange was one of raised eyebrows tinged with a level of cynicism; I was aware of the implication that there are 3 major opera companies in Berlin capable of fully staging productions, and I confessed (rather naïvely) that I had never before visited the Berlin Philharmonie as either a performer or audience member. I was expected to remain backstage and was met with surprise at the suggestion that I might watch the performance from out front. I found this reinforced my impression of the hallowed nature of the ground onto which I had stumbled, and the image of my naïvety. The performance felt nervous to me and, understandably, like a ‘second night’. Whilst the auditorium was approximately only two-thirds full, the audience reception was discerningly appreciative with measured applause, but decidedly less enthusiastic than in Hamburg. Again, beyond the gracious acknowledgements during the after concert gathering at a local eatery and bar, there was no further polling of audience reactions other than in press reviews.<sup>390</sup> Many members of the internationally assembled MCO, however, particularly in this more open-to-all-sides inclusive version of the semi-staging, commented warmly on their enjoyment (when they were not playing) at being able to watch the staging, appreciative of the singers and my own efforts in directing them.

In my view, these are examples of how personal encounters and buildings themselves variously contribute performatively to shared musical experiences. Architectural features, the curatorship of venues and repertoire, as well as the aura of prestige, whether deeply felt, awe-inspiring or expressed rather formally, exert a level of influence over both music makers and audiences. This influence can impact positively as well as negatively on our individual and collective experience of music, along with other factors that open or close our hearts to the immediacy of musical performance as entwined cultural expression and encounter. My own narrative account of this experience, much like a press review of one of the performances, generates its own performative map of the factors involved (and omitted) to be interpreted by you, the reader. Moreover, it contributes to documenting the cultural impact of my work with

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<sup>390</sup> For a review in English which highlights the Berlin debut of ‘a modern operatic classic’ and ‘Benjamin’s masterful orchestral writing’ see: <https://bachtrack.com/review-written-on-skin-jarman-hughes-benjamin-philharmonie-berlin-november-2018>

*Written On Skin*, becoming valuable to stakeholders within the current academic environment.

## 12 – Conclusion

My focus for this chapter emerged out of a professional interest in performance and mapping creative processes following my attendance of the ‘Beyond Mesearch’ conference in London in 2018. The experience of staging a production collaboratively with another director (Katie Mitchell), and then creating a semi-staging of *Written On Skin* have informed my own mapping and critical analysis of some of the themes within the opera, such as auto-ethnography, reflexivity and the liminoid. Consequently, I have examined the latter during the course of this chapter within broader cultural contexts and critical debates around performance and performativity. Mindful of my own reflexivity and performance as a stage director, I liken my experience of the process of making opera productions to a form of cultural cartography, and semi-staging to a virtual distillation of production maps.

Reflecting on this experience and addressing the ‘doubleness’ of being both practitioner and researcher, I position my own creative practice and ‘unfolding performative invention’ as a form of resistance to the evacuation of production values that can occur as a result of measures and paradigms of knowledge serving ‘efficiency’, where the performance paradigm has been appropriated in the administrative sphere to further a neoliberal agenda. In practice, what this tends to mean with regards to production values is a shifting of creative goalposts in correspondence with diminishing economic resources and the availability of collaborators for rehearsals; apprehending this early enough in the process and adjusting accordingly requires skill in the moment and experience to navigate, as this is not without its pitfalls and casualties, both personal and organizational.

In the twenty-first century, directing and performances of opera can, then, be likened to a kind of journeying, where it is possible to travel rehearsed pathways around topographical production maps, but also to make new tracks, particularly when the topography itself changes. In this sense, performance unfolds in correspondence with an opera’s actual changing features, such as: cast members, conductors, orchestral players,

set, lighting, costumes and props, as much as in the venues in which the performance takes place, how venues (or digital platforms) are curated and experienced by audiences, who are themselves varied and complex social actors. Performance can, then, be likened to the practice of orienteering, even if occasionally it goes off-piste. In my opinion, steering into culturally ‘foreign’ territory is perhaps where operatic performance is most at risk of not ‘landing’ or connecting with audiences, but is often the place of ‘glorious dreams’, visionaries and pioneers who value generative cultural exchange as continuous performative invention.

In my experience, the practice of mapping various human territories dialogically – in this instance with a focus on the liminoid – can lead to greater communion with oneself and others, where greater risks (to dramatic and musical cohesion) and rewards (of meaningful value) are made possible. In opera, circumstances often dictate that a very high level of professional preparation and self-discipline are required for this to actually be the case. Significantly, it is important to nurture faith in the process of searching for dramatic truths, which requires an open mind and heart from practitioners, and invites audiences to respond in kind. Much like the metaphor of the Boy’s heart in the opera *Written On Skin*, this is a place of both darkness and illumination; raising our consciousness of the workings of the human heart promises liberation from oppression, and the fundamental ignorance of human potential at its root.

## Chapter 6

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### **Conclusion**

#### **1 – Towards a definition for ‘performing realism’**

What conclusions can be drawn from the present study and what can be said to guide ‘realism’ as a trans-historical mode of discourse, or way of expressing ideas about the ‘real world’?

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, literature that engages with ‘realism’ as a dialectic and dialogical mode of discourse attempts to reposition the term away from its erstwhile uses: to disentangle it from historical movements, artistic genres or particular structural features of aesthetic works, be they literary, visual or musical.

Meanwhile, in creative practice the term ‘realism’ means different things to different people. In the context of the present study and opera, the term has been adopted as useful by some, is regarded with suspicion by many, or rejected all together as irrelevant by others working at the highest levels of professional production in the art form. Even so, it remains a term that is used (rather loosely) in creative practice, as well as ideologically in the wider political climate of uncertainty and inconsistently in relation to debates around the value of the arts. Now is a time for ‘realism’ to be reframed as a way of working, for the benefit of practitioners and theorists alike.

My two case studies are my distinctive contribution to knowledge as a practice-based investigation of contemporary opera staging from the point of view of revival director, working with major figures and institutions in the sector. I have evidenced detailed accounts of my creative research methodology, directorial methods, and how these have been adapted to different models of economic production, cultural performance and labour contexts. In advocating a practitioner-led approach to understanding the materiality of stage practice, inter-relating participant observation of rehearsal process and grounded knowledge of theatrical forms and modes of operation, I have given voice to the perspectives of theatre-makers and professional performers in a way that acknowledges the specificity of situated knowledge of practice and its



intellectual contribution to the field. At the same time, I advance a more rigorously theorised approach to *performing realism* on the contemporary stage than that afforded by practitioner discourse alone.

Fredric Jameson's experiment into realism's antinomies grows out of a philological analysis of the form of literary works and a project to map the 'political unconscious' embedded within them. For me, this approach yields useful insights and practical applications to my own creative practice and the making of opera productions as a form of theatre, where the 'political unconscious' is cognate to subtext; however, by situating the term 'realism' within a Marxist and materialist framework it is still largely tethered to a historical sense of modernity arising in the nineteenth century. Christophe Den Tandt's blueprint for a 'contemporary' post-mimetic dialogical realism attempts to distil early twenty-first century developments in the 'spatial humanities', foregrounding phenomenological concerns raised by the so-called 'digital humanities' and 'psychogeography'.<sup>391</sup> Realism, according to Den Tandt, aspires to individual self-reflection through communion with the 'greater self', brought into play within the social realm. Realism – as a dialogical and trans-historical mode – then follows a mandate to assert how the human being is connected to a sense of wholeness, through time and space, employing and challenging available conventions and methods to reach consensus about what is truthful, or at least plausible within certain parameters.

There is a convergence in approach with both Jameson's and Den Tandt's cartographic attempts to read and situate aesthetic works within world systems that resonates with my own directorial practice in opera and practice of Nichiren Daishonin's teachings, as a socially engaged form of Buddhism. The shared territory is the self-discipline of situating oneself in the present, exercising critical abilities and refining one's perceptual faculties in pursuit of an imaginative connection to a sense of 'truth', be that empirical, individually experienced, dialogical, or the performative power of belief and faith.<sup>392</sup> A climate of creating opposition between faith and free inquiry is unhelpful at best; under a dialogical paradigm and in the convergence of pathways to truth, spiritual or

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<sup>391</sup> For a complementary overview of work in these fields see Hayden Lorimer, 'Cultural geography: the busyness of being "more-than-representational"' in *Progress in Human Geography* 29, 1 (2005) pp.83-94.

<sup>392</sup> See Dhunpath, R. and Samuel, M (eds), *Life History Research: Epistemology, Methodology and Representation* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009).

‘poetic’ faith, grounded ways knowing and intellectual advancement may all support individual betterment and seek to improve our shared world. This latter point locates a set of tensions that, I am suggesting, the term performing realism brings to the fore, particularly in order to counter or dispel the dislocating mêlée of opposing narratives and agendas prevalent in our current time.<sup>393</sup>

*Performing realism* brings together Den Tandt’s ‘metarealism’ (the means whereby the representation of the social field is accomplished) and ‘performative reconceptualization of realism’ (which evokes ‘the human life world’ by means of an act of persuasion, employing a wide range of rhetorical elements). *Performing realism* concerns the tensions between doing and being; it differs from Den Tandt’s ‘performative realism’ which aims to describe the political and social interventions a certain kind of performance is tailored to make (such as Boal’s ‘invisible theatre’, ‘guerrilla theatre’, certain ‘flash mob’ performances or Michael Moore’s ‘mockumentaries’, which have now become familiar devices). *Performing realism* brings our attention to how a particular realism works by raising our awareness of how it is staged.

## **2 – ‘All the world’s a stage’: features of doing and tensions of being**

As part of my creative practice as research, I identify and discuss dialogical methods or ‘features of doing’ realism in my case study chapters. These include the following from within the opera *Written On Skin*: to narrate, describe, (re)enact, imagine, illustrate, illuminate, invent, embody; and from within the production staging of *Ariodante*: characters perform a puppet show expressing their hopes and fears, revisit, remember, (re)interpret, project onto, refute, investigate, lie, deny, insinuate, dupe, manipulate, confess, uncover the truth, decode a situation, persuade, condemn, celebrate, abandon, escape, and move on. In short, all such actions are related to mapping, navigating, and orienteering the social experience of events. Within the staging of an opera production these are performative in that they shape the ‘life world’ of those characters. Such characters and life worlds emerge from the imaginations and broader social identities of those involved in producing and staging operas. Such operatic creations are themselves

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<sup>393</sup> Den Tandt’s mission for twenty-first century realism addresses these as ‘the reified wasteland of global consumerism’. See my literature review section on ‘Towards a manifesto for the future of realism’ in chapter 1.

performance events that are mapped, navigated, and reinterpreted by audiences.

From my investigations into the notion of *performing realism* some of its dialectic ‘tensions of being’ include:

1. The paradox of always being yourself and an imagined other you (on a stage). This is at the core of Stanislavski’s acting method, for example, and an audience member’s ‘willing suspension of disbelief’. In other words, bringing Stanislavski and Coleridge together, this is the fragile tension that holds ‘poetic faith’ in ‘imaginative truth’.<sup>394</sup> In performance, some practitioners (such as Sarah Connolly in my interview with her as part of this study) express their aim for an ideal consciousness ratio of performer to *dramatis persona* of about 20:80%, for reasons of professional courtesy, contact with a conductor, safety and sanity. Outside a realist mode, there are those performers who lose themselves in their roles, which may make for compelling performances, but rather fraught and sometimes dangerous lives. There is also Diderot’s famous Paradox of Acting – that in order to move the audience the actor must himself remain unmoved – where the performer feels next to nothing of what he/she is able to transmit to others through technique. The inverse of this of course – where a performer internally experiences their role but is unsuccessful in communicating it to others – can also occur. This tension describes the intersection of an individual’s personal narrative (in life) with the imagined narrative of a story being told on stage, and how this dynamic extends to audiences (through the willing suspension of disbelief).

2. Mikhail Bakhtin’s chronotopes, or human bodies in time-spaces. Chronotopes aim to describe the tension between how the body experiences an eternal present (phenomenologically) and the human impulse to tell stories that unfold over time.

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<sup>394</sup> See C. Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, in which he details: ‘Always and forever, when you are on the stage, you must play yourself. But it will be an infinite variety of combinations of objectives, and given circumstances that you have prepared for your part, and which have been smelted in the furnace of your emotion memory.’ (p.165). Coleridge’s phrase to describe his own imaginatively elaborate poetical works, such as *The Rhymer of the Ancient Mariner*, now has the meaning of allowing oneself to imaginatively ‘go along with’, enter into or immerse oneself in an invented world being ‘staged’. Stanislavski on the nature of staging ‘imaginative truth’ writes in *An Actor Prepares*: ‘Truth on the stage is whatever we can believe in with sincerity, whether in ourselves or in our colleagues. Truth cannot be separated from belief, nor belief from truth.’ (p.122-123).

Fredric Jameson describes realism's antinomies, or dialectic, in this vein as 'narrative' and 'affect'. A good example of this operating in practice in the present study is the production staging of Ariodante's arias that map this tension,<sup>395</sup> which is thematically heightened through contrast with the puppetry sequences.

### 3. The state of being 'in between'.

This is the human condition of always being in the middle, 'in between' the past and the future, at the folds. In *Written On Skin*, Angel 1's liminoid experience as the Boy is an example of a conscious exploration of this ontological frame. One cultural expression and representation of the 'in between' is the map, which is rhizomatic and resists chronology and organisation in favour of a wide array of attractions and influences. In practical terms, the map has many forms and is frequently remade. An operatic score is a map. Opera productions are topographical maps of the societies that produce them. Within the production staging of *Ariodante*, the complex puppetry sequences are performative maps of a community's hopes and fears; they variously and ritualistically endorse a set of values, mark public celebrations, shame and condemn those accused of immorality and foreground the individual casualties of religious dogma within a community.

### 4. The unity of instance and totality, or micro and macro dimensions.

This is something that both Bohmian thinking (on the level of the implicate order in examples such as the hologram) and Jameson's brand of Marxist criticism attempt to resolve. For me, Nichiren Buddhism still provides the most successful philosophical framework and practical tool for raising my own awareness and consciousness of this principle of synchronicity in daily life. On the level of staging a cultural performance, such as an opera production, this would translate as plotting each moment as a coherent expression of the metanarrative, overall conceptual approach or 'reading' of the work: shoring up the embankments of poetic faith and improving the chances of Den Tandt's 'reality bet'. The way the character of Ariodante, for example, 'joins up the dots' to reach insights and draw conclusions about his place in the world, even when they are 'wrong', shapes his experience of reality.

### 5. The relationship between the formal reality of an aesthetic work and the outside reality of the world.

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<sup>395</sup> See Chapter 4 'Staging *Ariodante*', section 5. 'Return as a musical and production conceit.'

This relates to Den Tan's contractual terms of reference to the actual world and imagined reality of the fictional, or virtual one. Their existence in tension is what sustains the dialogue between the experience of social reality and the performance of imaginative truth. Focusing our attention on the promotion and reception of an opera production, taking stock of the geographical location of a performance, the venue, contemporary cultural, historical and social resonances and the audience demographic can tell us more about this tension around specific performances; they are also measures of congruence or success of an aesthetic work's 'reality bet'.

6. The formal unity and possibilities of music and story to commune with completion versus the incompleteness of real life.

Because of this 'artificial' communion with a sense of completion in a performance, we can imaginatively witness, reach understanding and even enjoy the most difficult and extreme human experiences, something with which opera often concerns itself. The composer George Benjamin eloquently voices his consideration of this phenomenon in my interview with him.<sup>396</sup> This particular tension also relates to Isaacs's notion of an artificial 'container' and environment conducive to dialogue.

7. The relationship between Roland Barthes' semiotic techniques of 'verisimilitude' and 'reality effects' versus *what* is being expressed.

These 'reality effects' can lose their ability to convince over time as their codes of simulation become familiar to us and so fall short of imaginative truth, into kitsch or insincerity. These in themselves may serve realist aims or jeopardize the plausibility of the form of realism in question. Pastiche, for example, may function as a gesture of conviviality and resistance (highlighting oppression in the puppetry sequences in Acts I and III as part of the production's metanarrative treatment of *Ariodante*); all genres may act as vectors of empowerment. In other words, this is about the tension between form and content. George Benjamin and Martin Crimp's decision to create an opera in which there is a declared and heightened sense of realism is another example of this tension in the operatic form of *Written On Skin*.

8. The dialectic in realism of ideology and utopia.

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<sup>396</sup> See Chapter 3, section 6: 'Creative practitioners on valuing what they do.'

Jameson distils this tension from the relationship between ‘the symbolic structures of containment’ (semiotic codes) expressing ‘an awareness of the nature of social life as we live it now and a utopian desire for how we feel it in our bones it ought rather to be lived’.<sup>397</sup> This is related to one of the characteristic strengths of theatrical performance as a form: to show how badly people behave, for whatever reason, and the consequences of such behaviour. It is, of course, also related to educational disciplines that espouse the betterment of individuals and society, with a mandate to do good in the world.

Whilst performance as a paradigm is seen to operate in different sectors of society,<sup>398</sup> performing realism here relates to doing with intent and being awake to the attentions of others and ourselves; it relates to material performance as a thing (the realism in question); and to performativity, or the socially shaping nature of certain language, signs, thoughts and actions. Performing realism denotes both a theoretical framework and a methodology with an emphasis on doing and being. The theoretical frame (itself a performative gesture) seeks to stage the human being through a relationship with wholeness and in correspondence with material, temporal and spatial contexts (following Marxist, Bohmian, Stanislavskian, or even Buddhist thinking). Performing realism is trans-disciplinary, bringing different representational and expressive practices into critical alignment; this dialogical process is messy and embroiled in disciplinary hierarchies, which is why exercising ‘suspension’ is important to fully explore the layers of a particular realism.<sup>399</sup> Performing realism is located in the ‘metaxy of practice’,<sup>400</sup> which is a liminal, often liminoid space (as in *Written On Skin*) ‘in between’ the micro and macro dimensions, the past and the future, involving a self-consciously performative virtual element, or an imaginative extension of our perception of the present.

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<sup>397</sup> Jameson, F. ‘Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture’ in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992 [1979]) pp. 9-34.

<sup>398</sup> I discuss this in chapter 5, with reference to McKenzie, J., *Perform or Else*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>399</sup> For a fuller discussion of ‘suspension’ see my chapter on Theory and Method, 5.3 ‘Bohmian dialogue and suspension’.

<sup>400</sup> Les Roberts discusses Ian Biggs’s notion of the ‘metaxy of practice’ in his editorial survey of the growing field of practice-led research with regard to ‘Deep Mapping and Spatial Anthropology’ in *Humanities* 2016, 5(1), p.5.

Whatever the material conception of the map – as a performative frame for the more immaterial places of the body and imagination – *performing realism*'s cartographic practices are more than representational: they are ontological and political. The making of opera productions and the so-called 'deep mapping' of a community's sense of place are examples I am citing of how a particular map of a shared reality also acts to shape the social reality it is mapping. This is the performative aspect of *performing realism*.

I have argued, following Den Tandt's mandate for realism in the twenty-first century, that without discounting the richness of ambiguity, or the existence of simultaneous perspectives and paradox, realist negotiation should reach an agreed upon congruent expression of something plausible, as opposed to nebulous or endless interpretative possibilities that cannot be pinned down. This involves a scale of views of realism and choice in performing interpretation. I would not claim that my two case studies of operatic works were conceived to 'chart and scrutinize the reified wasteland of global consumerism' (the first of Den Tandt's three-point manifesto), however, I believe I have argued that they chart and scrutinize 'the virtualization of social relations' (qualifying Den Tandt's first point) in a way that reflects aspects of the society and time in which they were generated. Neither would I assert that my chosen operatic works expressly set out to 'render account of the multicultural diversity of most contemporary societies through dialogical means' (Den Tandt's second manifesto point), but I would claim that they are good examples of how dialogical methods come together to *perform realism*.

Operatic performance, in my view, draws on a range of topographical cartographies and forges new pathways, becoming an act of cultural orienteering. *Performing realism* in opera, therefore, extends the idea of how production maps are created dialogically to how multiple casts embody and audiences correspond with them. Led at different phases in the process of creating an opera production by different people, opera's heightened collaborative forms frequently test the bounds of belief in its 'experimentations with the real' (following Deleuze and Guattari's definition of the map) and therefore also push Den Tandt's criteria and mandate for a post-mimetic dialogical realism to the limits. In this sense, I believe, my two case study examples do indeed 'open up discursive and aesthetic negotiations' to come to an agreed upon version of

interpretation for performance, ‘yet remain attentive to social, discursive, and physical constraints that bear upon the course of attempts to represent the truth’ (the third point in Den Tandt’s manifesto). Where *performing realism* extends the reach of Den Tandt’s manifesto for realist aesthetic works is in its dynamic relation to audiences and society.

As an artificially contained ‘thing’, the staging of an operatic production performs a reading of an opera in its form as a cultural artifact; the *performing realism* of this metanarrative (the production) challenges or resonates with an individual audience member’s sense of plausibility. In a similar way to those involved creatively in the making of productions, individual audience members participate in *performing realism* to the extent to which they exercise their abilities of ‘suspension’ and self-embedding in correspondence with a production. Audience members’ own levels of preparation, previous knowledge of the material, own individual narrative and openness to the experience are all factors in determining the value of this, which is notoriously difficult to measure beyond specific case studies but exists anecdotally as a ‘known unknown’.<sup>401</sup>

Within the body or contained ‘group’ of an audience to a live performance event, and through fifth-wall conversations amongst audience members, the process of *performing realism* ripples outwards, continuing to swell or diminish the social impact of the production’s metanarrative and collective experience of affect.<sup>402</sup> This dimension of the value of *performing realism* can be measured, through audience-based research exercises, such as polling audiences and audience questionnaires, although these are problematic.<sup>403</sup> Paratexts (such as promotional, programme and supporting material) and the mutation of live operatic performance across other media continues this wave-like dynamic, as do reviews and debates around culture and the value of the arts in wider society. The reception of operatic productions in the press and avatars, such as video clips

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<sup>401</sup> Such a detailed study of the impact of a particular performance on individual audience members has fallen outside the scope of the present inquiry, however, indications that this would be a rich area of further research are present in many of the transcribed interviews with practitioners and colleagues (who are also often audience members) conducted during the course of this project.

<sup>402</sup> Richard Jones, in my interview with him, speaks of being able to ‘smell’ this phenomenon in the theatre, using the example of the audience’s response to Sarah Connolly’s performance of ‘Scherza infinda’ at the dress rehearsal of *Ariodante* in Amsterdam: articulated as a kind of communal experience and ‘connection to a feeling of depression and expression of impotence that was very rewarding for them’.

<sup>403</sup> There are numerous issues around the validity and ethics of data gathered from surveys and questionnaires when applied to audiences. An interesting and useful online resource that addresses some of these can be accessed at: <https://www.theaudienceagency.org/insight/surveys> [last accessed 26/7/2019].



online, can be studied and their value critically appraised, as I have attempted to do in my case studies. Disjunctions at this level occur where dialogical energies dissipate at the edges and the tensions that ‘contain’ *performing realism* unravel (Den Tandt’s ‘reality bet’ fails), whereas meaningful conjunctions may occur at narrative overlaps and folds, in ‘waves’ of emotion, and with social, historical, geographic and cultural resonance.<sup>404</sup>

### 3 – Performing realism and valuable futures

In my literature review for this study I comment on the phrases ‘culture industry’ and ‘creative industries’ as having colonised the discourse in public debates in recent years around the perceived value of the arts to society. In Adorno and Horkheimer’s encounter with North America and their critique of ‘the culture industry’ of 1947, Jameson points out they described ‘not the theory of culture but the theory of industry, of a branch of the interlocking monopolies of late capitalism that makes money out of what used to be called culture. The topic here is the commercialization of life.’<sup>405</sup> Jameson welcomed Adorno’s bitterly pessimistic concept of a totalising system, and the individual’s resistance to it, as having renewed value in the 1990s; it could be a useful antidote to the smug cultural contentment in advanced, post-industrial societies in an age of late-capitalism, or globalisation. Approaching 2020, the monopolising media apparatus now extends the commercialisation and virtualisation of life across wifi networks, Internet streaming and mobile devices – reaching into the opera house, with its corporate business partnerships, cinema broadcasts and Internet platforms.

Nonetheless, I prefer to take a more hopeful stance towards wholeness. My practice of Nichiren Buddhism is a way of putting my life in rhythm with a universal, creative life force with the aim of orienting my thoughts, words and actions towards manifesting courage, wisdom and compassion. This is a struggle between my benighted and enlightened self. It requires faith in my own inherent Buddha nature, or greater self,

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<sup>404</sup> One clear example of this to my mind outside the scope of my case studies was the reception of another opera production (of which I was associate/revival director) during the course of my research project: *Khovanshchina* in 2017 for WNO. This coincided with the centenary of the Russian Revolution in a nationally coordinated commemoration of a significant event in global history. The revival was the result of extraordinary efforts and self-investment on behalf of the artists and performing company, was the subject of added media attention and received dramatically differently reviews in the press from when it was first produced in 2007.

<sup>405</sup> Jameson, F., *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 144.

and that of others. From such a perspective, Buddhism elucidates the human experience of reality, society and the environment as the shadow to the body of the self.

In spite of my experience of the ill effects of the commercialization of life, and in repositioning them as fuel for transformation, I am encouraged by countertrends within society to assert transformative, humanistic narratives. I find such an agenda within academia that seeks more nuanced rubrics for the measurement of value and how to effect change in government policy, and within the cultural sector to make ‘politically aware’ creative work that explores issues of identity, situated by a sense of place, while thinking more globally.

So-called ‘glocalization’, an increasing awareness of the global significance of our local actions (particularly around climate change and human rights) and the values that underpin them are now high on the agenda of UK arts council strategies, such as Arts Council Wales’s international strategy for 2019, ‘Wales Arts: a bridge to the world’.<sup>406</sup> The 2019 Arts Council of England’s strategic consultation ‘Shaping the next ten years’,<sup>407</sup> features a draft strategy that makes a distinction between ‘culture’ as fundable, consumable artistic output and how it relates to an individual’s sense of identity and heritage (regarding food, religion etc.). Furthermore, it distinguishes ‘culture’ from ‘creativity’, which is seen as a quality accessible to everyone in everyday life.<sup>408</sup> The Dutch paper on *Culture: The Substructure for a European Common* (2014) and the idea of a shared European wealth of signs and values is proving to be somewhat contentious under the strain of Brexit and the rise of the political far right, but has galvanized resistant, continent-wide, creative collaborations, at least where opera is concerned through co-productions and Opera Vision. Individual artists, and established artistic directors, as custodians of art forms such as opera, may be a line of defence against the decentering of the human being in the age of late capitalism, as exemplified in Pierre

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<sup>406</sup> See [https://issuu.com/artscouncilofwales/docs/wales\\_arts\\_international\\_strategy](https://issuu.com/artscouncilofwales/docs/wales_arts_international_strategy) [last accessed 25/8/2019] which concludes with: ‘So what could we see, what could you hear in a world in which Culture is understood as central to the meaning of Life? A world in which Culture joins with those other basic entitlements of security, health, education and prosperity as the means to allow human beings in all their diversity to thrive? A world in which political and social structures are enlivened by the ability of people to envision themselves and their purposes, individual and social, in the collective delivery of a more equal, fair and sustainable society? This is why, in pursuit of our international ambitions, we work collaboratively with others to foster cultural understanding between people, governments and nations.’

<sup>407</sup> See <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/nexttenyears> [last accessed 25/8/2019].

<sup>408</sup> See <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/draft-strategy-2020-30> [last accessed 25/8/2019].

Audi's valiant rejection of classifying opera as an industry, creative, cultural or otherwise.<sup>409</sup>

In my own semi-staging of *Written On Skin*, my focus has been on continuous performative invention as a contribution to facilitating musically and dramatically compelling performances of this contemporary operatic work. This has also been a form of resistance to performance conditions (the concert platform) that potentially undermine operatic production values. Thus, the individual practitioner's creativity is positioned as a performative act of transformation.

As a result of exploring dialogue as a research method in this study, I now see my function as a revival director at times to be a facilitator of dialogue between participants and modes, where the metanarrative of an opera production resembles Isaacs's 'container' for exploring in rehearsal, challenging assumptions, mapping collaboratively in 'a quest for artistry in human communications'.<sup>410</sup>

As a revival director of productions that were not originally my own, along with a fidelity to production ideas, my position affords both a level of critical distance from the production map, a certain privilege of creative freedom (within the parameters of the 'container') and a level of remove from the original director's conception of the production ideas. In a revival, the production is more or less an agreed upon given, but the way in which performers move through it, and sometimes even why they do so, becomes discursive and different for each new member of cast. In certain respects, such a position lends itself to working in a dialogical realist mode. At other times, under the exigencies of the schedule (particularly in larger companies), there is a perceived deferment to the director's outside eye and shaping hand in forming a production narrative. Increasingly, as rehearsal time is whittled away by financial pressures that impact more severely on revivals than new productions, I experience more emphasis on the director's singular ability to galvanise resources and shape the production. There is,

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<sup>409</sup> I quote from my interview with Pierre Audi and discuss this more fully in chapter 3.

<sup>410</sup> See <https://thesystemsthinker.com/dialogue-the-power-of-collective-thinking/> for an overview of Isaacs's levels and stages of dialogue within a 'container' that, to my mind, find their equivalence in rehearsing an opera production. Also see <https://thesystemsthinker.com/the-world-cafe-living-knowledge-through-conversations-that-matter/> for an article, co-authored with Juanita Brown, that offers practical guidance on conducting dialogue through the principles of the World Café, about which see <http://www.theworldcafe.com> [last accessed 31/07/2019].

on the one hand, a shift in power that results from shortening rehearsal time that privileges the director's voice in the process; on the other hand, the tools at a director's disposal and the process itself – from suspending judgment and the exploration of production ideas to 'fully-baked' and integrated performances – suffers. Under such circumstances, from the point of view of the directing role, I see *performing realism* as tailoring appropriate methods to the particular circumstances, balancing pragmatism with hopeful and imaginative solutions to go beyond the purely conventional, guided by self-discipline, a belief in the people involved, the quality of the operatic material, and how it is being produced.

#### **4 – Recommendations**

The following are practical suggestions and recommendations for practitioners and opera producing companies, based on the framework and methodology of *performing realism* outlined above. Some of these recommendations, therefore, might need to be formalised, whereas others need only be kept in mind. I envisage many being transferable to environments and situations outside opera, but these are drawn from my research, specific case studies, and reflections having been a resident staff director for ten years at WNO and a freelance opera director for fifteen years. They are also intended to serve as recommendations for other research projects which count dialogue and practice as research among their methodological approaches:

1. Schedule regular creative dialogue sessions. At the early repertoire planning stages for seasons in opera companies, engage in dialogue sessions across stakeholder groups such as senior management, production teams, technical, artistic and development departments, patrons, sponsors and audiences. Continue these regularly throughout seasons, from the creation of new productions, as well as revivals, to end-of-season debriefings. Company spaces for dialogue would be about the advantages of thinking together, so that individuals are encouraged to share in the ownership of the discussion and ideas that are generated from it. This would, of course, need to be understood to be a safe space, rigorously 'managed' and facilitated so that everyone's

presence is valued. In my experience, this requires a cultural shift in many leadership styles and around the sharing of information. Consider appropriate dialogical methods tailored to stakeholders. Not every role requires every bit of information, but a genuine appreciation of everyone's role in a project supports a collective sense of ownership and contribution. Although they operate under very different models to European houses and schedules, the pre-production Tech Week wrap-up meetings in which I have participated at the Lyric Opera of Chicago are a good example of what I am suggesting. They take place at the end of a preliminary week of production departmental meetings and lighting sessions (yes, before the show is even rehearsed!) that allow everyone involved a space to voice their questions, concerns and insights to the company pre-production, so there is a collective sense of responsibility, in addition to individually defined professional roles. In my experience this contrasts with planning meetings I have attended at certain European and UK opera companies which were held too late in the season to do much other than firefight scheduling issues. I would also cite my experience of Artistic Director Kasper Holden's invitations to visiting production teams to feedback on their experience of working with the company he was running (in the case of Dutch National Opera and Royal Opera House, Covent Garden) as exemplary of good practice; he encouraged us (as visiting artists) to speak freely about every aspect of our experience across company departments. A designated company member took minutes of salient practical points and attached constructive notes to production files for future revivals. This added to the sense of value attributed to the work, and no doubt to the quality of Kasper Holden's knowledge of the company, giving him the best chance to take responsibility in his role.

2. Link insight events, such as pre-performance talks, education projects in schools and communities (more) dialogically to productions (new and revived) under this model. The ROH Covent Garden does this extremely well and has been leading the way in the UK for some time, in my view. Post-performance question and answer sessions with cast and creative team members are an

opportunity for audiences and company members to deepen their sense of shared ownership and/or defend interpretative production choices. These are common with plays, but rare with operas. The potential benefits are in creating valuable shared, reflective, therapeutic, and insight-generating spaces where participants can think together about the work with which they are all engaged. With groups, both small and large (such as audiences) trained facilitators in dialogue and carefully constructed questions are important, particularly in navigating potential conflicts, resistance to challenging opinions and from any existing cultures of cynicism or blame.

3. Map both individual and shared working territory. Within opera producing companies, consider provision of training in how to understand and interpret inter-departmental/interdisciplinary cartographies, improving everyone's ability to read, cross-reference and decode relevant information in different forms. This could also serve as an educational resource (for example, with internships and work-experience students) and in orienting visiting artists and new administrative staff. The structure, coordination and level of detail on weekly and advanced production schedules, for example, vary enormously from company to company. Visiting artists as well as resident company members misread, or simply miss significant information. Even good practice can often be improved with better communication, regular reminders and consultations that engender a sense of shared ownership and appreciation of the bigger picture.
4. Establish and reiterate clear contractual parameters of the work at each phase. Opera companies and visiting production teams are governed and often tied by their contracts. I have also witnessed many changes and differences in chorus contracts, contracts for onstage instrumental musicians, actors, supers and dancers, for example, which have a real bearing on the skills and people available and at what cost in opera. It can be a minefield. From the outset, when it comes to negotiating professional contracts as a freelancer, I advocate following Richard Jones's advice to me to take into consideration the four Ps: people, piece, place, and pay. At least two of these should be favourable, else

there will be unnecessary suffering. To work within a contemporary realist mode this point also takes into consideration Den Tandt's contracts of reference and reality. For a director and opera company these might progressively involve discussions around the conceptual and design approach to staging, ways of rehearsing, and scheduling, carefully planning rehearsal sessions and detailing each stage of the process. For example: what is expected at an initial music call, or first encounter with staging a scene; where a rehearsal is planned to be an exploration of a particular scene or relationship, perhaps putting to one side (suspending) other concerns; the setting of blocking; sessions allocated for revisiting ideas and 'shining up' or finessing scenes; the particular value and aim of a studio or 'floor run'; technical rehearsals such as a Stage Piano and Technical Run through, with very different aims and expectations to Stage Orchestral and Dress Rehearsals. These are all different but not everyone involved necessarily shares the same information or understanding of the aims and objectives of sessions unless they are, in fact, shared. Performance and layers of performing can thereby be more clearly investigated and more inclusive.

5. Identify, champion and defend what is valuable, important and good. There are many ways to rehearse, but certain processes require certain steps or phases to properly integrate creative work. These need to be identified, championed and defended at every level against the effects of budgetary cuts. Productions generated using a Stanislavskian approach to ensemble acting, for example, may require a different amount of time to revive than a production that is more about design ideas or spectacular technical elements. Often, and for many reasons, companies work to scheduling slots and available resources that do not fit with the productions they are reviving. In such circumstances, communicating values, intentions and ideas in person is far more effective than email or on paper alone. In my experience, it is healthier and less stressful, for example, for directors and conductors to share their rehearsal plans in advance and in detail whenever possible in person, allowing for plans to be subject to change (some companies now require this, but many still do

not, perpetuating a rather old fashioned style of leadership). The reduction in allocated rehearsal time in opera means that a more methodical approach and management of creative time become necessary, in my opinion, to ensure the best possible quality of the creative environment.

6. Involve (potential) audiences at every stage. There are many lessons opera companies could learn from community-based cultural activity. If not already undertaken, consider employing research as a guide to structuring and tailoring audience engagement activities, marketing and dialogue sessions, such as Morris Hargreaves McIntyre's (MHM) Audience Atlas and Culture Segments.<sup>411</sup>
7. Consider incorporating Ikeda's six principles of engagement in dialogue with creative collaborators, sponsors, patrons, and audience communities; tailoring/orienting stakeholder, education and community work by employing a reflective structured dialogue approach, as follows: 1) Prepare for dialogue by studying the life/lives and work of dialogue partners. 2) Give respect by investing time, interest and one's full attention. 3) Create intimacy by asking personal questions, whilst respecting personal boundaries. 4) Move from the personal to shared interests and from experience to conceptual formulations. 5) Draw attention to one's own values (e.g. Humanist) emerging in dialogue partners' own words as a way of highlighting similarities in thinking. 6) Investigate disagreement to find common ground.<sup>412</sup>
8. Consider integrating specific ways of promoting productions that actually reflect the work developing through dialogues with audiences and in the rehearsal room, rather than inflating the personalities and images of individuals involved (often more the case, in my experience). This is practically challenging and requires more planning and confidence in the process. To give the best chances for a production's 'reality bet', I would recommend referring back to a bigger picture through interviews, insights, blogs, posts on

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<sup>411</sup> Artistic directors often instinctively resist using these because they appear reductive of the complexity of individuals and society, yet the data suggests successful applications for this psychographic segmentation tool. See: <https://mhminsight.com/culture-segments> [last accessed 10/08/2019].

<sup>412</sup> I discuss these in greater detail in Chapter 2, Theory and Method, 5.2 'Daisaku Ikeda and the creation of value'.



social media, rehearsal diaries etc., engendering a sense of shared responsibility and commitment to a holistic view of the work and company in its wider social contexts. Marketing a company's brand, attributes, story and values to audiences has become about building relationships, and points of connection.

9. Where the unique force of a particular personality, such as a charismatic performer, director or conductor is privileged in *performing realism*, this can work dialogically as long as everyone is able to relate to and buy into an individual's vision, or sense of realism, so that there is room for individual expression within a particular approach, concept or interpretation. The integrity of any realist contract depends on the quality of every stakeholder's commitment, level of self-embedment and disciplinary rigour.
10. Most importantly, *performing realism* is an appeal to an individual's sense of their true or greater self, to bring out the best in themselves and others, and to assert a connection to wholeness, in contrast to the tyranny of the ego or smaller, fearful self. This is about recognising the necessity and value of broadening one's own thinking, mind and vision through dialogical contact with many others: to be a cosmic citizen of the world. Self-discipline and a healthy, contractual relationship to power (not taking oneself too seriously, exercising genuine humility, recognising responsibility and generously acknowledging the contributions of collaborators) are important and should be promoted, particularly in marshaling the considerable talents and forces required in opera. This is also about having a guiding sense of purpose to seek out and promulgate truth in its variety of forms. Because of its heightened dialogical form, opera has the expressive potential to 'go beyond' the limitations of conventional meaning and representation in search of the 'known unknown', yet, must remain pragmatic enough to be accessible and open to dialogue with its diverse audiences.

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