

From “Vaginal Wagner” to “Verdi Does Vegas”: Close Reading the Concept Production

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I love opera. I grew up in an opera-loving family. For years, my brother would test me with “Name that Tenor.” As a teenager living in Westchester County, New York, I would frequently buy standing room tickets for a buck or two to see a Saturday matinee at the Met. Standing room was home to a lot of colorful characters back in the late sixties and early seventies. You never knew when some irate denizen might deal a stealthy blow to some unsuspecting miscreant! Once the victim was an elderly nail filer.

My experience of opera has changed dramatically over the years. Before the days of “supertitles,” which, at the Met, appear on small screens embedded in the seatbacks rather than somewhere up around the proscenium, I used to study a new opera before seeing it for the first time. I would check the record set (it was invariably a set) out of the library and study the libretto at least twice, going back and forth between the text of the original language (mostly Italian) and the English translation, while listening to the music. After that, I would let the music play while I went about my daily routines, so the opera would be familiar and welcoming when I heard it live. With the advent of supertitles, I got lazy. Also, “records” had gone out of style.

When I finally got around to seeing the Met in HD some six or seven years ago, I got even lazier, foregoing the live experience almost entirely. In recent years, the preponderance of “concept” productions has prompted me to reflect upon the nature of opera as a signifying system—or a constellation of signifying systems (an observation not unique to me, I have learned)—and how one might “read” one of those new productions, many of which strain credulity in an art form known for straining credulity! By concept productions I mean those that, far from merely changing the setting or time period of an opera, make an interpretive leap that departs in some significant way from a more literal (or traditional) staging, often through the use of abstraction, radical “contemporariness,” or shock. Such productions are often referred to, disparagingly, as “Eurotrash,” and, indeed, Europe has led the way in operatic risk-taking, particularly in the

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case of Wagner (Levin 5). Not all of such productions, however, originate in Europe; neither, I would add, are they all trashy.

Not being a scholar of opera, I fall back on my training as a “close reader” and my intuitive and emotional sense of the art form—after some 50 or so years of listening and viewing—in order to explore, in a theoretically informed manner, the ways in which one production might legitimate a director’s concept while another might devolve into incoherence. I base my analysis upon three recent HD productions, whose relative popularity is by no means to be taken as a measure of their success or failure in aesthetic terms. Each represents an “updating” of one kind or another. The stripped down *La Traviata* directed by Willie Decker was spare and considered ugly and off-putting by many. To me it was spot on as an abstract distillation of the narrative. I have based my discussion of *Traviata* on a DVD recorded live at the Salzburger Festspiele 2005, for which this production was created. It was presented at the Met during the 2012-2013 season. *Parsifal*, enigmatic under the best of circumstances, was reimagined in 2013 by François Girard as a post-apocalyptic fable about sin and redemption whose staging was deeply invested in the iconography of misogyny. It was powerful. In 2013, Tony Award winner Michael Mayer created a production of *Rigoletto* that is set in 1950s Las Vegas. Many people seemed to enjoy it. I thought it was a travesty, not so much a conceptual misfire as a gimmick. It is my deep sense that in late modernity, and by that I mean, roughly, the post-1950s, opera has come to embody a certain “otherness” that must be respected rather than purged or attenuated (as, for example, when it is dragged, unproblematically, into contemporaneity) if the art form is to remain true to its emotional core.

Opera studies have expanded significantly over the last several decades, reflecting a growing interest in the interdisciplinary nature of the art form. Linda Hutcheon has provided an invaluable guide to this field in her *PMLA* article, “Interdisciplinary Opera Studies.” To think of opera as a signifying system whose moving parts are meant—traditionally, at least—to harmonize, if not coalesce, in the act of performance is to take seriously, not only the musicality and stagecraft that are essential to the art form, but also its textuality. By textuality, I mean a system of signs, only one of which is linguistic, whose inherent relation to one another and to other texts is unstable and porous. A “text,” following Barthes, is not, in contradistinction to a “work,” closed. It bears the traces of other texts, discursive traditions, aesthetic conventions, and cultural narratives and tensions; it is subject to the inherent instabilities of language itself. The textuality of an aesthetic object makes “reading” an act of negotiation between co-dependent semiotic constructs—the text and the reading subject (itself a moving point on a grid of overlapping socio-linguistic-cultural systems which circumscribe and inform the generation or construction of meaning) or, in simpler terms, a member of a specific interpretive community. So, not only is there an instability among

(and within) the different signifying systems that constitute opera in the act of performance, but also in the totality of its effects as these are deployed in the production and experienced by the viewer.

For a typical Met audience, indeed, for any opera-going audience, “meaning” is at once straightforward and complex—in the sense of being highly mediated. The great nineteenth-century operas, like novels of the same period, are popular entertainments that do not present themselves as riddles or opaque aesthetic objects that require intellectual work, not to say “heft,” to locate meaning (except perhaps in the case of Wagner.) An opera is a story set to music that is sung rather than spoken. The most commonly produced operas are sung in Italian, French, and German. Indeed, they are staged around the world where audiences will not be expected to understand most of the words being sung. Since supertitles in the opera house are a relatively recent development, it is likely that a typical opera audience would have had an understanding of the story, but not necessarily any familiarity with the libretto. Even today, with supertitles universally available, whether a concept production will hit or miss its target is based, mostly, on visuals, but not necessarily the relation of the visuals to the other components of the opera. Indeed, some productions rely on an audience’s willingness to overlook the *disjunction* between words and translation. For example, in the Act II abduction scene as staged in Mayer’s *Rigoletto*, when Marullo directs Rigoletto to hold the ladder (“Terrai la scala”), the supertitle reads “Go on up and wait.” There is no ladder!

On the one hand, meaning may be a simple matter of language: what, exactly, is Cio Cio San saying when she sings *Un Bel Di* (and to what extent does it matter to any given director?) On the other, the more a production departs from a literal staging, the more “meaning” loses its transparency. What does it mean that in Anthony Minghella’s 2006 production of *Madama Butterfly*, for example, that Cio Cio San’s son is a puppet manipulated by visible puppeteers? A literal production aims—or least does not seek to undermine or challenge—transparency, while a concept production tends to resist transparency. For many operagoers, meaning may simply inhere in vocal expressivity or excellence; these do not necessarily coincide.

Patrice Pavis, writing about spoken drama, argues that “meaning is, in the end, the audience’s reading of the use made of the stage” (qtd in Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon 878). With the addition of music, Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon describe the stage as “an aural and visual space with complex and potentially open signification. It is the task and responsibility of the *mise en scène* to constrain and direct the variety of possible interpretations and responses to both the words and the music—and to the story they tell” (787). *Mise-en-scène* can, on the one hand, represent the period in which the action is set with great historical accuracy and fidelity to the original staging manuals. Franco Zeffirelli is known for his elaborate and realistic stagings of classic operas

such as *La Bohème*, *Turandot*, and *La Traviata*. These sometimes overwhelm the viewer with their sense of historical presence. On the other hand, more edgy productions will alter time periods or, mostly, I imagine, due to budget constraints, offer simple, sets, almost architectural in terms of sensibility, that are suggestive rather than representative. Recent productions of *Orfeo ed Euridice* and *The Damnation of Faust*, for example, seem to share a multi-tiered scaffolding on which various scenes are mounted. The Met's famous *Ring Cycle*, designed by Robert Lapage (who also created the *Damnation of Faust*), was built upon the idea of a gigantic machine with many moving parts. Lapage's *Ring* was a concept production in this limited sense. In their discussion of opera staging, Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon cite Susan Bennett, who argues that

the performative *mise en scène* replaces the authors' printed texts as the 'creative aspect in the signifying process'. At any given moment, that multimodal *mise en scène* is structured or organized to give emphasis to a sign or sign-cluster intended to focus the audience's attention on that aspect of the drama (160), generating new meanings, perhaps different from those intended by either of the dramatic texts. (878)

An opera, as originally conceived, can be seen as an aesthetic product—or text—produced in the discursive space (linguistic and musical) inhabited by artistic collaborators of a particular social, cultural, historical—and political—milieu. I will posit the notion of a “primary text,” a collaborative effort of composer and librettist (unless, as in the case of Wagner, they are one and the same): the original production, conceived and staged—though not necessarily fixed—so far as we can tell, in accordance with the composer's wishes/vision as articulated in staging manuals and, in some cases, modified by the demands of censors or other constraints. Verdi, famously, had to alter both *Rigoletto* (based on Victor Hugo's play, *Le roi s'amuse*—and that in turn based upon the real-life escapades of Frances I of France) and *Un Ballo in Maschera* (based upon the real-life assassination in 1792 of King Gustav III of Sweden who was killed as the result of a political conspiracy against him) to overcome the objections of religious and political censors. The libretto of *Ballo*, written by Antonio Somma, was itself based upon another libretto, which the playwright, Eugène Scribe, had produced for an earlier opera composed by Daniel Auber. What counts as primary is not so straightforward!

Most operas are, in fact, distillations, interpretations, or reimaginings of other texts, usually plays or works of fiction, many of which are, in turn, based on historical events. *La Traviata*, for example, is based on *La Dame aux camélias*, a novel by Alexandre Dumas, fils, first published in 1848 and then adapted for the stage before Verdi turned it into an opera. Just as many nineteenth-century texts were “mimetic,” in that they sought to represent “life” as opposed to following an established narrative form such as romance, nineteenth-century opera productions were, perhaps, similarly transparent. If an opera took place in a for-

est, the audience saw a forest. If the opera took place in a country village, that's what the set would represent. I call such productions—those that seek to represent with historical accuracy the time and place of the action (in terms of sets, décor, and costuming) and that are consistent with the primary text—traditional or, following Levin, literal. A traditional production of a Wagner opera such as the *Ring*, which is already fanciful, would aim for a certain transparency between text and setting. Representing Valhalla as, say, the Golden Motel on Route 66 in Texas (Frank Castorf's 2013 production of the *Ring* at the Bayreuth Festival) would not be traditional, but, rather (again, following Levin) figural. It is a concept production.

As I have suggested, opera texts are porous, intertextual, and shaped by narrative. For example, Verdi's interpretation of Shakespeare's *Othello* or *MacBeth* was, of necessity, filtered through nineteenth-century sensibilities (political and philosophical well as aesthetic) in the Italian territories. New opera productions offer new sets of artistic collaborators the possibility of reinterpreting or reimagining the primary text. I think of all opera productions that "innovate" as palimpsestic renderings of the primary text. The "surplus" of the new can either enhance, distort, or, in some cases, all but obliterate the underlying aesthetic object. How much is an opera indebted to a particular time and place? Among the changes Verdi made to *Ballo* was to move the setting from Sweden to colonial Boston in order to appease the censors who objected to the depiction of a monarch assassinated on the stage. Earlier Met productions followed this tradition; later productions staged the action in Sweden, while the current production takes place in a relatively generic present. Changing the setting is one way to update an opera's currency, as is changing the century, as for example, from sixteenth-century Germany to a twentieth-century atomic bomb laboratory (Des McAnuff's *Faust*.) To the extent a radically new staging (a concept production) produces a sense of cognitive dissonance that does not resolve over the course of the performance, it may be deemed a success or a failure.

At its most fundamental level, opera is a narrative form that is realized through music, words, voice, dramaturgy, and mise-en-scène. It is narrative that binds the principal elements of opera together. Although the "text" of an opera is, from the perspective of narrative, the libretto, the libretto alone is an insufficient guide to meaning. For one thing, the complex relationship of words and music renders a close reading of opera, based on the libretto alone, insufficient. In addition, the tendency in opera to privilege music over words has the effect of marginalizing the linguistic aspects of the form. One would not, for example, study Boito's libretto for *Otello* as one would Shakespeare's play, *Othello*, poetic as the former might be. The relative elasticity of mise-en-scène frequently overrides the particularity of a composer's or librettist's "intent" (as that may be expressed in staging manuals and the like, or as the same may have been commonly interpreted over time), leaving us, with a virtually unlimited array of stagings.

Levin cites French director Antoine Vitez, who argues that productions (of plays) are, in effect, translations: “One can stage plays without end, just as one can translate without end. And it is exactly because it is impossible to translate that I maintain: the production of a play is a translation” (75.) The impossibility, according to Levin, “derives from an inevitable insufficiency.” For Vitez, “a stage production, like a translation is never conclusive; it always invites—and even deserves—improvement” (75). To the extent that a director deems him- or herself an innovator, he or she will, of necessity, be a translator. To the extent that the director is a literalist, his or her goal will be to preserve and reiterate. Most contemporary productions fall somewhere in between.

For the average operagoer—to the extent we can posit such a thing—linguistic meaning is secondary to the very fact of its vocalization in musical utterance. To the extent that audiences follow along with supertitles, these are translations whose fidelity to the original may be tenuous in spirit if not in fact. Or, in the case of the Vegas *Rigoletto*, wholly expendible. At the very least, such translations may vary over time in order to better reflect “contemporary” modes of articulation. In any event, I do not believe that most operagoers worry about “definitive” translations of libretti (even to the extent that these might exist.) For the listener who is fluent in the language being sung, the ability to “hear” the text is also compromised by the nature of operatic vocalization. I have often had trouble following the text of operas sung in English. It is enough to understand the gist of an aria, whereas the same cannot be said of a Shakespearean monologue or a poem wherein the specificity of words is everything.

It is also true, however, that the widespread use of subtitles has required a greater fidelity of stagecraft and dramaturgy to the text (Levin 52). The audience will expect to “see” a dramatic unfolding that comports with the literal and emotional sense of the dialogue it is simultaneously reading. In the pre-subtitle world, specificities are not all that important. Add to that the great distance between the stage and the great majority of seats, even the details of *mise-en-scène* become blurred. Indeed, the presence of subtitles can become somewhat problematic when a conceptual or figurative production presents a *mise-en-scène* that is at odds with the text. What can the words “sacred wood” mean in a production of *Parsifal* that is post-apocalyptically devoid of trees? Another case in point is the missing ladder in *Rigoletto*. When such anomalies occur, other elements, thematic in nature, may compensate, successfully or not, for the failure of the words and images to cohere.

In any case, it is clear that the operatic text allows for a greater range of interpretive choices than would be available to a purely text-based work. Unlike a score or a libretto, which is fixed (though not in the sense of interpretive finality), a live opera is a negotiation among dispersed—and discrete—sites of signification. Music (the score), libretto (the script), performers (the cast), and, to a lesser but no less powerful, extent, conductor/orchestra (and sometimes danc-

ers) are all sites that generate or, at least, inflect or nuance, meaning. One need only to consider the meditation in *Thais*, the humming chorus in *Madama Butterfly*, or the storm scenes in *Rigoletto* and *Otello*, to consider the power of the orchestra (or a single instrument) to convey a mood, a character's sensibility, or, famously, weather. I will have more to say about the dancers in my discussion of *La Traviata*. The most significant "wild card" in opera's constellation of fixed and transient elements is the *mise-en-scène*, as this dominates the stage and determines the degree to which the production will disturb, deepen, validate or vitiate the received meaning of the opera.

An operatic text, realized in the act of performance, does not lend itself to the same kind of scrutiny as a linguistic (or cinematic) text for obvious reasons. Given the ephemeral nature of live performance, opera's textuality in the performative sense has historically been inaccessible. We cannot "read" a past production, nor will any production's effect be revealed in the sound recording of a live performance. While we may "consume" aspects of the opera in recorded form, we do not fully grasp the opera in all of its aural and visual textuality nor do we experience the opera in all of its communicative and layered dimensions. These, also, and of necessity, are filtered through the interpretive lens of a director, and, as such, are partial and provisional in nature. Visual recordings of opera productions, in addition to whatever else they suggest about the changing nature of the art, provide a "text" to read and study and from which to derive meaning. I will, thus, confine my analysis of specific productions to works that have been shown in HD or available on dvd, as these will remain as fixed aesthetic objects or texts.

HD brings a whole new level of mediation to the experience of opera. If, in the house, one's view might be affected by height or distance, in the video transmission, one's view is necessarily that of the camera. Closeups can gin up the emotional intensity of a scene where, before, it was the voice, and the voice alone, that carried the weight of expressivity. Before the days of HD, verisimilitude was understood differently. Most folks didn't care that Sutherland appeared, in some costumes, like "a large column walking about the stage" (her words) or that a consumptive Mimi or Violetta was being sung by a robustly endowed soprano of somewhat advanced years. Operagoers whose sole experience of the art has been limited to HD transmissions (or who first came to opera during the era of HD transmissions) may be unaccustomed to the idea that verisimilitude can be conveyed by the voice alone. Now that millions of viewers "consume" opera in movie theaters, the glamour and acting ability of the singers have come to overshadow sheer vocal chops. It is certainly the case that some concept productions—*La Traviata* may be a case in point—are built upon costuming that demands a certain look. A soprano such as Joan Sutherland could never appear in Decker's production, nor could many of the leading tenors of the twentieth century.

Paradoxically, HD transmissions may diminish the power of a set, insofar as they limit our view to that of the camera's lens. In this they have more in common with movies than live theater where we can never escape the totality of the staging. In addition, the camera becomes another center of signification in making narrative choices on our behalf. All narratives are by nature selective. Why are certain events or scenes selected at the expense of others? If the camera lingers on a glamorous soprano's face, are there other events on stage we are missing? If the camera cuts back and forth, are we missing a certain continuity? As moviegoers, we are used to being led in this way, but in live opera, we get to make our own choices.

There is another sense of verisimilitude, and this is a function of opera's otherness, to which I alluded earlier. Not only must we be convinced of the character's believability—whether in aural or visual terms—but of the story's as well. When operas are staged along traditional lines, their otherness is subsumed in their historicity (of necessity, other.) When operas are “updated,” there is the risk—especially with the more outré productions, that in the attempt to make the opera “seem” contemporary, that is to say, less “other,” the emotional core is either sidelined with an ironic wink or entirely deflated. Contemporaneity works best when otherness is maintained, as in Decker's abstract production of *Traviata* or Girard's more allegorical take on *Parzifal*.

Decker's abstract staging, created for the 2005 Salzburg Festival, not only maintains, but magnifies the emotional core of the opera. Described by *New York Times* critic Anthony Tommasini as “grippingly spare” and “almost surreal,” the production asks that we forsake visual verisimilitude for a set of symbols: a red dress, a clock, a camellia, and the figure of Death. Traditional productions are elaborately staged representations, including, of course, period costumes, of elegant Paris interiors and, in Act II, a finely appointed country house. They are transparent, in that they require no more of the spectator than to passively enjoy pretty scenery and, hopefully, orchestral and vocal excellence. Decker's production, however, is built upon a semi-circular space with the suggestion of a bench that follows the arc of the circle. Tommasini described it as arena-like. There is a gigantic black and white clock on the wall that, on occasion, serves other functions. During the gambling scene, for example, the clock acts as a gaming table. The action takes place within the arena, but sometimes the chorus is placed above the circular wall, giving the illusion of an overlook. The blocking is an essential source of meaning and, working in tandem with the symbols, compensates for the lack of conventional signifiers.

Act I of a traditional set of *La Traviata* will represent the luxuriousness of Violetta's apartment, the lavish furnishings a signifier of her great desirability to men of immense wealth and position. Both the furnishings and costuming will reflect nineteenth-century aesthetic styles and conventions. The world of the Parisian demimonde will transparently reveal itself to a viewer. Like a Victorian

novel, the set will provide a window onto a specific world. Violetta's illness is to be understood within the terms of a narrative that is embedded in cultural particularity. The fact of her illness interrupts the gaiety of the scene, but within the tableau she remains a figure of wealth and allure. She is an effect of the scenery. The music, of course, introduces the pathos at the heart of the drama.

The stripped down set of the new production boils the narrative down to its two essential elements: Violetta's status as a courtesan and her impending death. Without all the fussy scenery, we are left with a party girl in a red dress whose time is running out. The red dress evokes passion, gaiety, and blood (and, by association with blood, tuberculosis.) It can be put on or removed with ease; it can be hung on a wall as a continuing symbol of Violetta's identity as a courtesan or discarded when her purity of spirit is revealed. When she is not wearing the red dress, she wears a simple white negligee, free of adornment. Indeed, the red dress is as much a prop as it is a costume. A red sofa stands in for the elaborate furnishings. Its function in Act I is to provide a platform for exhibiting Violetta's seductive—bordering on lewd—posturing—the sofa, with Violetta on it, is carried around by the male choristers; in Act II, it is used by her male “double” for his own mocking display. By dressing the entire chorus as men in formal attire, gender graphically insinuates itself into the narrative.

Violetta describes herself as a “povera donna, sola, abbandonata in questo popolo deserto” (“a poor woman, alone, in this crowded desert”) but the new set literalizes her isolation, investing her status with a visual force that is absent from the traditional staging. Not only is she the only female character to appear in the party scenes, but the blocking demonstrates, with visual authority, her predicament. The choristers, for the most part, move as a unit; Violetta is, literally, a woman alone. A courtesan, unless she is extremely savvy, lives and dies at the pleasure of men. As Germont attempts to argue, even Alfredo will tire of her when she loses her bloom. The tenuousness of that existence is conveyed to great effect by symbol, rather than signifier. What is lost in historical specificity is gained in the power of symbols and their power to resonate beyond the particular. But this is a production that calls out for a svelte Violetta. The party dress would not “signify” in quite the same way if an audience were distracted by the singer's unseemly appearance. In period costumes, such cognitive dissonance is attenuated to some extent by the camouflaging effect of skillfully constructed garments. In a simple red cocktail dress, not so much.

Decker's staging creates a Brechtian “alienation effect” by estranging the audience and forcing them to confront the social realities that underscore the dramatic content of the opera. Brecht wanted to break the illusion created by conventional plays of the time. He believed that the “suspension of disbelief” created by so-called realistic drama, with its manipulative plots and heightened emotion, turned the experience of theater into a form of “escapism.” Rather than feel a deep connection to the characters Brecht believed that an emotional dis-

tance should be maintained. It is only when this happens, that the audience can effectively critique and evaluate the struggle between the characters and understand the social realities of the narrative.

The prologue to Act I—during which the curtain is usually closed—lays out the symbolic landscape. At one end, a small frail figure in a red dress. At the other, Death, gazing implacably from his seat under the clock. Violetta approaches the figure haltingly, then imploringly. He passes her by, but turns back to face her and hands her a white camellia. She swoons in his arms, stumbling out of her red high heels. She walks toward the clock, shoeless, and the flower falls to the floor. Violetta kneels at the foot of the clock, one hand touching its face. Suddenly, Act I begins, and the “all male” guests enter from a door on the right like a pack of predatory animals. She is momentarily disoriented, then dons her red heels, jumps onto the bench and raises her champagne glass in triumph. Death is a non-character. No one sees him but Violetta until Act III when he morphs into the good doctor Grenvil. Sometimes, he is merely a presence; sometimes he is more active, as much a graphic representation of Violetta’s consciousness, her own self-awareness, as he is a symbol of her impending death. Decker’s use of symbols is effective because it lends the character of Violetta a large measure of psychological realism. Her psyche is externalized, just as is her position in French patriarchal society is literalized. The camellia is, of course, a nod to the novel upon which the opera is based, but also a symbol of Violetta’s short-lived but spectacular beauty and her purity of spirit. In Japan, the white camellia is also a symbol of fidelity.

Scene 1 is not coy about Violetta’s status as a sexual object, both in the way she arranges herself revealingly on the red couch and in way the male “guests” surround and appear to grope her. The production insists on physicality and invests Violetta with a sexuality that is, variously lascivious (as when sung by Anna Netrebko) or poignant (as with Natalie Dessay.) The waif-like Dessay and the young Netrebko (2005) wear Violetta’s frailty as easily as they do the red dress. We “read” the body; it is a source of meaning. As the orgiastic activities of the scene—from which Alfredo is, of course, excluded—draw to a close, the clock is seen speeding up. Violetta tries to stop the hands from moving. Once again she crouches against the clock while Death hovers nearby.

Violetta’s country house is signified, principally, by flowered slipcovers on upholstered furniture. There is, in addition, a circular screen on the back wall of the set that shows color flowers in bloom. At the end of the act, the flowers lose their color. The clock is also similarly concealed. Violetta and Alfredo wear matching robes in the same fabric as the slipcovers. Hers partially conceals a simple white negligee, his, white boxers. As with the red cocktail dress, these costumes can be unforgiving. Imagine a corpulent tenor from the 1950s or 60s, a Tucker or Bergonzi, say, spending the first part of this scene in boxer shorts? It would never happen. The wrong body can interrupt meaning, forcing the viewer

to focus on the body rather than the singer or the drama. After Violetta promises Germont that she will give up Alfredo, she rips all the slipcovers off the furniture and the clock. Time—and its inevitable consequences—once again inserts itself into the narrative. When she resolves to return to Paris and attend Flora’s party, she pulls on the red dress, which has been hanging on the wall, over her white negligee. Rather than a costume change that occurs off stage, the layering of costumes adds to our sense of the constructedness of public identity. The fluidity of props continues to externalize—in a dramatically compelling fashion—that which a traditional production would take for granted. Act II merges seamlessly with Act I, as masked revelers enter from the left and Germont and Alfredo are lost in the confusion.

Act II, which takes place in Flora’s apartment, contains both a ballet and the dramatic confrontation between Violetta and Alfredo, resulting in Alfredo’s public shaming by his father. In a traditional production, the gypsy ballet is as much an entertainment for the audience as it is for Flora’s guest. It has both a diegetic and nondiegetic function. In the Decker production, the function of the ballet is principally nondiegetic; the choristers, still dressed in formal attire, now wear masks. One of the masks is a large red bull’s head. The “gypsy” singers wear female masks; the others, who look down from atop the wall, wear male masks. Suddenly, a red dress is suspended by the “male” choristers. In the highly stylized ballet that follows, a shirtless man, miming obscene laughter, jumps on the red sofa and dons the dress and a female mask. He performs a parody of Act I for the horrified Alfredo. The bullfight portion of the gypsy ballet mockingly casts Alfredo as the insufficient matador who is impaled by the hands of the clock, which the “faux” Violetta has pulled out of its face and used as *banderillas*. Decker’s reimagined ballet generates meaning in a manner wholly inconsistent with mid-nineteenth century sensibilities but not within the terms of the opera itself. Introducing irony where before there was transparency creates another layer of signification that should complicate the audience’s reaction.

During the gambling scene, as mentioned above, the clock is used as a gaming table but, more poignantly, when Alfredo calls the guests in to witness the shaming of Violetta, he pushes her onto the clock, and shoves bills into the top of her dress and into her mouth before showering her with the rest of them. This creates the effect both of a crucifixion, which serves to underscore the injustice of his rage and Violetta’s innocence, and also of a “specimen” pinned to a display card.

Act III begins amid the detritus of Act II, Scene 2. The clock is still on the floor where it acted as gaming table; the crumbled bills are on the floor, as are Violetta’s red heels. The litter of the past lingers into the present. The Grenville figure becomes Grenville, the character, briefly before returning to a spectral presence waiting patiently. He is a suitor of another kind. Once more, the clock remains central. It is the “furniture” on and around which she reads Germont’s

letter, and it is from within its face that she sings the second part of “Addio del Passato,” but then addresses the final “Ah-Tutto. Tutto fini” to Death, who is seated, facing away from her, on the right side of the stage. She sinks down at the end of the aria, leaning her head against his back, with great familiarity and, almost, a sense of beatitude.

Another innovative aspect of Act III is the reprieve of the double. In a traditional production, street sounds from Carnival are heard in Violetta’s bedroom. In Decker’s staging, as Violetta is leaning against Death, the door on the left opens and the revelers pour in. Violetta’s double, in a white negligee—a woman this time—is carried in by a reveler wearing the bull mask from Act II. He places her in the middle of the clock, where decorative ribbons swirl about her. The male character who was her double in Act II, now dressed as a man and again miming wild laughter, grabs Violetta roughly and swings her around to face her double, who has now put on the red dress. The two Violettas gaze at one another, as the double is carried off in the clock. Streamers litter the floor. We do not see the clock again, for, indeed, time has run out. As a projection of Violetta’s psyche—or the suggestion of such—this is compelling.

As the act progresses to its inevitable conclusion, the only symbols remaining are Death—who occasionally acts as Dr. Grenvil, and the white camellia which takes the place of the medallion with Violetta’s picture which she gives to Alfredo. When they sing the final repetition of “Parigi oh cara,” on the bare stage, each spinning in his and her own orbit, Annina on the left and Death on the right, till finally they come together and sink to the floor amidst the discarded ribbons of the revelers, the stark tableau heightens the emotional tenor of the duet, its surreal quality.

Act III is very much a *romance à trois* among Violetta, Alfredo, and Death. And this has everything to do with blocking. When Violetta tells Annina to fetch the doctor and tell him that she wants to live again, Death suddenly rises from his seated position and turns to face her. She addresses, “Ah! Gran Dio” to him, as does Alfredo when he sing the words, “Ah, tutto alla speranza non chiudere il tuo cor” (“Do not close your heart to hope.”) As Violetta sings the closing phrases of “Se una pudica vergine,” she moves around the semi circle first to Alfredo, then to Germont, and finally to Anina, in a gesture of farewell as Death moves center stage, where she comes to rest in his quiet embrace. He cradles her and strokes her hair, as she begins her final utterances “È strano!” Death moves to the rear, and Violetta sings her final words in a circle of light before collapsing, alone. Death—or the doctor—has the final word, “E spenta.”

I came away thinking how fussy costuming and scenery could be. Decker’s production reaches for and attains an emotional truth belied by its abstract mise-èn-scene. It is not “set” anywhere, except to the extent the costumes and furnishings (the couch) are contemporary, more or less, to us. Its otherness does not distract or disturb and its (to me) relative marginalization of the Violetta-Alfredo

pairing in favor of the Violetta-Death pairing creates a whole new palette of emotional colors. That said, the old-style “park and bark” delivery—where emotional truth must resonate within the voice alone—would be wholly out of place here. The art form, it appears, adapts itself to new technologies and alters the visual landscape of what we see when we go the opera.

Parsifal has given rise to a range of innovative stagings, from the surreal film directed by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (1982) to a 2012 Bayreuth production by Stefan Herheim in set in Germany in the period before the First World War and extending through the aftermath of the Second. As transparent as Verdi might be, Wagner tends to be opaque, or, if not opaque exactly, then rich in interpretive possibility. Because his great operas derive from myth rather than historical precedent or “verismo,” theirs is an economy of symbol rather than historicity. In particular, *Parsifal*’s enigmatic misogyny inheres in the clusters of meaning that attach to its two major symbols, the spear and the grail. Though *Parsifal* derives from a legend about the hero’s alienation from the grail kingdom and his quest to rediscover it, the central symbol of the opera is a spear. Girard’s production foregrounds the misogynistic elements of Wagner’s opera, rendering the hero’s quest marginal to the overriding threat of castration that the staging conveys. While its post-apocalyptic setting suggests one kind of meaning, that of a damaged and dying world, Girard’s creation of new centers of symbolic meaning privilege causality over resolution. That is to say, the opera seems visually obsessed with the “problem” of female power to the point of diminishing the object of Parsifal’s moral growth: wisdom gained through compassion. Ironically, it is through the literalization of certain elements, such as Amfortas’ bloody wound, that the symbolic effects of the production derive their power.

In a traditional staging of the opera, Acts I and III, set in the domain of the Grail, would feature a holy forest and some aspect of a castle interior. Act II, set in Klingsor’s domain, would feature, likewise, a garden and a castle interior. In such a “transparent” rendering of Wagner’s primary text, the visual cues are consistent with popular associations concerning Arthurian narratives. When Guernemanz refers to his surroundings as a holy forest, the audience sees some rendering of a forest. The flower maidens in Act II appear as one might imagine them to be. There is no disrupting element of stagecraft that would undermine or deviate from the apparent message of the signifying props and personae or the libretto. I do not mean at all to suggest that the totality of the work itself is transparent. Indeed, it is the relative opacity of *Parsifal* that gives rise to so varied a production history.

The post-apocalyptic setting of *Parsifal* is highly effective thematically. Nevertheless, it is inconsistent with the linguistic sense of the libretto. The sacred forest is now a vast wasteland, visually compelling but anomalous. Indeed, it contradicts, rather than affirms, a sense of the sacred. When Parsifal shoots the swan, he is admonished by Guernemanz:

Shameful, cruel deed!
So you can murder, here, within this forest,
Where quiet, holy peace should reign?
The woodland creatures, are they not
Your friends?
Are they not gentle and tame?
From the branches the birds sang their songs to you.

What sense can such words make in a flat, scarred landscape with nary a tree in sight? Where, it appears, nothing grows?

Similarly, the last act takes place on Good Friday at the advent of spring; both Parsifal and Guernemanz comment upon on beauty of their surroundings. Indeed, Parsifal is moved to invoke the flower maidens of Act II: “Many a magic flower I’ve seen, which wildly sought to twine itself around me; but ne’er before so fair and mild the meadow flowers blooming.” By literalizing the spiritual impoverishment of the Grail community, however, the disharmony between the blighted community and the plenitude of nature (to which, clearly, Guernemanz, in particular, is attuned) is attenuated.

On the other hand, the barren set is also designed to dramatize the gendered nature of this Parsifalian world. The space is divided by a jagged crack that runs the length of stage. At times blood runs through it; at times it appears to contain water. The knights, who are dressed in white business shirts and black trousers, keep to the right side of the crack. Kundry keeps to the left. And there is a certain sexist logic to this, the right being symbolically linked to light and spirit and the left to darkness and carnality. No one crosses this boundary until the end of the opera. In a traditional production, there are no female characters in Act I other than Kundry. In this production, the “female” space is peopled, not only by Kundry, but by a whole cast of silent female characters. At times, they appear like zombies, in stark contrast to the orderly, civilized knights. Kundry, whose name evokes early iterations of the word “cunt,” spends a lot of time on the ground, in this, as in traditional stagings. One cannot help but think of Lilith, in Jewish lore the first wife of Adam, co-created from dust and not from Adam’s rib. According to legend, she refused to be subservient to Adam and abandoned him in the Garden of Eden. Lilith is often represented as a serpent.

The signifying work of Girard’s staging tends to align “meaning” with the positionality—blocking—and representation of male and female characters. The apocalyptic “back story,” ostensibly, the loss of the holy spear to Klingsor, has everything to do with the emasculating potential of female power, which has robbed the kingdom, through the body of its ailing king, of its virility. The separation of the sexes suggests a disharmony whose significance appears cosmic. Wagner’s libretto tells us that knightly chastity is the highest virtue, that Klingsor, through his surrogates (the flower maidens and Kundry) has set himself the

task of destroying the kingdom of the Grail by causing the knights to give in to the temptations of the flesh. Indeed, it is Kundry's seduction of Amfortas that has allowed Klingsor to appropriate the spear. In the process, Amfortas receives the wound that will not heal. Yet in this new staging, the power of the feminine seems so much more fundamental than, simply, threatening masculine "virtue."

Amfortas' wound, which Wagner has located in his side (but which, in the original was in his groin), becomes, in the Girard production, a whole new locus of meaning. The Wagner's narrative draws an analogy between Amfortas' wound and the wound received by Jesus with the very spear that, together with the Grail, were delivered by an angel to Titurel, Amfortas father, thus sanctifying the Grail kingdom. But Girard forces us to gaze on the bloody spot in garment worn by Amfortas and it conjures nothing less than a wound of castration. Once the image of a castrated king is unleashed as a symbol, it cannot help but draw in a range of associations from the literal to the figurative (emasculatation across a range of psychic, social, political interests), together with the fearsome power of the feminine to cause such unmaning. So, while the primary text might emphasize chastity as the principal spiritual support of the Grail community's spiritual "election," Girard's production is heavily invested in the fear of emasculation.

Girard's point is driven home in Act II, the set of which is suggestive of a huge vulva. The so-called flower maidens, wearing white slips and holding spears vertically, form a line across the stage. The whole conjures up a literalization of the "vagina dentate" (toothed vagina), a mythological trope signifying the potentially dangerous consequences of sexual intercourse and, more broadly, the emasculating potential of the feminine. Such imagery is consistent with the idea of castration that Amfortas' bloody garment evokes. Girard has said that Act II takes place in the wound that the dividing crack in Act I represents. But given that the earth itself is conceived in terms of the feminine (Mother Earth) and the "wound" is, in psychoanalytic terms, associated with the vagina (the castrated male body), Girard's assertion is wholly consistent with the genital imagery of Act II.

Another locus of meaning in Act II is the presence of blood. Indeed, the stage is flooded with it. As the white gowns of the flower maidens and the bed upon which Kundry attempts to seduce Parsifal become bloodstained, the blood takes on greater associations. Amfortas' wound and the blood associated with castration are called to mind, but so is menstrual blood. Certainly, for women, the bloodstained bedclothes and nightgowns are images that resonate beyond the wound of castration. Ironically, the blood of Christ is also evoked, as the blood-soaked Parsifal conjures up the image of the Grail and the "sacred blood" glowing therein. The imagery of blood powerfully ties the thematic elements of Wagner's text together. In juxtaposing the menstrual blood of Klingsor's domain with the sacred blood collected in the Holy Grail, there is an implicit contrast

between death (menstruation occurs in the absence of fertilization) and life, as the Grail is associated with continued vitality of the Grail kingdom. In this paradigm, of course, it is the “vaginal” kingdom associated with sterility that must give way to the acorporeal (but gendered female) life-sustaining Grail.

It is ironic to me that the vaginal world of Klingsor is presided over by a castrated man. Desperate to purify himself and become worthy of the brotherhood of the Grail, Klingsor castrates himself, but to no avail. With the loss of the Phallus, however, he comes into his own:

Afire with rage, then Klingsor swiftly
Learned,
How his unholy, shameful deed
To evil, unholy craft could lead:
He mastered it!

There are anomalies here, and they exist in the libretto as well. Kundry is subject to eternal punishment for having laughed at Christ on the crucifix. She is the servant of Klingsor. On other hand, it is also suggested that his “dark” powers are directly a result of his self-castration, his “becoming-woman.” And so, even as Girard seeks to genitalize Klingsor’s domain, its destructive qualities stem not from the feminine but from masculine insufficiency. Klingsor’s primary rage is a function of his rejection by the brotherhood, not of the seductive powers of women (though these are not unrelated.) And although Kundry is cast as Lilith or the “Eternal Feminine,” she is the only character in the opera to return evil with good (when she offers Parsifal water after he has attempted to assault her.)

In Act III of the Girard production, the *mise-en-scène* returns to the wasteland. During the prologue, the knights and the ghostly women, all in tatters, appear from the rear of the stage. It is clear that things have further deteriorated. There is a screen at the back, which shows, alternately, dark swirling clouds and light. There is a sense that the world is now, finally, on the brink of the abyss. The knights appear to be digging Titurel’s grave. When they exit at the rear of the stage, only one man and one woman remain. Then they go their separate ways, thus continuing the theme of sexuality gone awry.

The blocking of Act III scene 1 is interesting and contributes to how we are to continue to read the gendering of this production. Parsifal, having returned to the Grail kingdom bearing the spear, plants it in the ground, a prominent reminder of its phallic nature. When he collapses, overcome with remorse for his sinfulness, Kundry brings him water from the crack in the ground. Gurenemanz, however, instructs her to obtain water from the holy spring, on the right side of the stage. Kundry crosses over, but returns to the left side, where she ministers to Parsifal’s feet while Guernemanz attends to his head. Parsifal is proclaimed king by Guernemanz, then takes Kundry’s hand and she crosses over once again

to the right. She is baptized by Parsifal, water runs through the crack, and Parsifal crosses over to the “female” side. The reconciliation of Parsifal and Kundry occurs over the space of the crack and, facing each other, both sitting on the ground, they seem to presage, not a priest and acolyte but, rather, a new Adam and Eve. At the same time, while the libretto calls for Parsifal to kiss her on the forehead, in Girard’s production, Parsifal hesitates and does not bestow the kiss. They exit with Guernemanz on the left—the “female” side.

In scene 2, two groups of knights appear from the rear. The group on the left carries the ailing Amfortas; the group on the right carries the body of Titurel, shrouded in strips of white fabric like a mummy. Between them are the women, veiled and kneeling. Contributing to Girard’s sense of a female-driven narrative, it is given to Kundry, and not the knights or squires, to bring forth the Holy Grail (and, this being a female symbol, Kundry’s service is just.) The kneeling women stand, and Parsifal enters from the rear, making his way through them. The women then take their places amongst the men for the first time. As Kundry holds the chalice, Parsifal dips the spear into the bowl, at once a symbol of reconciliation and a fulfillment of Act’s failed consummation, now cast as a sacrament rather than a sin.

Kundry and Parsifal face each other, and she falls to the ground lifeless. Parsifal holds up the chalice and the opera comes to an end. Her death, Girard’s production suggests, is the price to be paid for the acceptance of women in the Grail kingdom. Sorceress and seductress, the wayward and grossly inarticulate Kundry, in whom sinner and penitent uneasily coexist, bears the weight of female transgression. Like the ritual scapegoat of old, she is sacrificed so that the kingdom of god may live on. Redeemed, to be sure, but dead. The “Kundry factor” eliminated, the knights are no longer beset by the crippling threat of emasculation.

With the silent presence of female characters in Acts I and III and the decidedly vaginal imagery of Act II, Girard’s staging evokes a powerful sense of the opera’s misogyny and preoccupation with sexual danger. Indeed, more than the post-apocalyptic *mise-en-scène*, which is itself arguably constructed upon the wounded body of a female earth, it is the gendered blocking and imagery that render the production so powerful. Girard’s production is also distinguishable from more traditional stagings of *Parsifal* by its carnal nature, and by that I mean its attention to the body. From Amfortas’ bloody shirt, to the bloodstained costumes and bedclothes (not to say the gallons of blood that flood the stage) and vaginal imagery of Act II to the body of Titurel, no longer concealed in a coffin—to Amfortas’ lowering himself into the open grave to join his father. Girard’s production mines the signifying power of Wagner’s libretto and turns *mise-en-scène* into a rich and satisfying source of meaning that is both an interpretation and reimagining of the opera.

Where the new productions of *Traviata* and *Parsifal* have explored aspects of meaning that are not inconsistent with the primary text, and done so in ways that preserve opera's otherness, Michael Mayer's production of *Rigoletto* relies on gimmickry to provide flash and a sense of misguided contemporaneity to Verdi's tragic masterpiece. Mayer has explained,

One of the things I discussed with Peter [Gelb] was to try and make the audience feel closer to the story—without setting the opera today, which dates something automatically. It's about finding the right setting in a context that's in the past but not so far in the past that it feels like a museum piece. That way it can have real, immediate resonance but also a kind of purity and universality. So I tried to imagine what a contemporary version of the decadent world of the Duke's palace would be—where people are partying and fascinated with power and money and beauty—and I thought of Las Vegas as the epitome of an American destiny for the events that happen in *Rigoletto*....I really believe that the intent behind each action in *Rigoletto* translates very beautifully to the world that we're creating. It will take a little bit of a leap for some people to go with us, but I think if they do, it will be a very satisfying evening.

To read Mayer's take on *Rigoletto*, you'd think that all of the action in the opera was driven by the decadence of its setting rather than a father's curse. The primary text is set in sixteenth-century Mantua, but was based upon a play, *Le Roi s'Amuse*, by Victor Hugo. The play was set in Renaissance France. Problems with the censors required Verdi to change the setting from France to Italy and the licentious king of France to a duke from the provinces. Mantua to Vegas, however, may be a bridge too far.

Mayer envisioned a kind of cultural stew in which the Duke and his retinue are represented as Rat Pack types (with the Duke doing a Sinatrasque turn). Rigoletto, in a red argyle sweater and green pants (his "mantle" an old trench coat), is the Rickles-style jester, minus a hump of any noticeable proportion. Monterone is, inexplicably, portrayed as an Arab sheikh, and Sparafucile is identified with organized crime. His hangout is the casino bar and his dwelling is a strip club where a topless dancer writhes around a pole at the beginning of Act IV. This is, presumably, Maddalena but, *of course*, it is not the mezzo soprano who appears later in the scene. Gilda is appropriately costumed in a modest blue dress, but Giovanna, her "attendant," dressed in a black pencil skirt and green cardigan, spends a lot of time smoking and looking snarky. She gives off a whiff of sluttiness, as if Mayer felt the need to draw a parallel between her outward appearance and inward duplicity. Never mind she is drugged in the elevator during the abduction of Gilda who is carried away in a brightly-painted Egyptian sarcophagus. Why Rigoletto would entrust his daughter to such a character is one of the many mysteries that bedevil this production.

Superficially, a pleasure-loving aristocrat surrounded by lackeys and facilitators may suggest the Rat Pack, but Mayer wholly misses the mark when it

comes to the opera's essential pathos. Among the glaring inconsistencies between the historical setting and 1960s Las Vegas is the signifying power of "la maledizione" or the curse. In a Christian world still animated by theology, a curse is a weighty affair. The phrase, "La Maledizione" is the ringing conclusion to the opera, as a devastated Rigoletto rages against the death of his daughter. Would Don Rickles be moved by a curse, no less a curse from an Arab sheik? Would Don Rickles lock up his daughter (and consign her to the care of a woman of questionable integrity) only allowing her out to attend church? Indeed, there *is* no place in 50s Vegas for the Giovanna character. And would Frank Sinatra, moreover, be trolling a Las Vegas church—of all places—for fresh conquests? In the pre-modern world of sixteenth-century Mantua, these things make sense.

Then there is the character of Rigoletto himself. The hunchback's deformity is his defining physical characteristic and essential to an understanding of the character's place in the social landscape, not to say his own inner psychology. Mayer's jester has no hump—or, it is difficult to discern whether he does have a slight one or it is simply the somewhat doughy physique of Željko Lučić. This is understandable, given the *mise-en-scène*. It is unlikely that a hunchbacked dwarf would figure prominently in Rat Pack-type circles. But Mayer's vision lacks the complexity to support the idea of a moral or psychological deformity in Rigoletto's character that would "stand in" for the physical deformity. Verdi's Rigoletto is the subject of a libretto in which the word "difforme" carries the weight of his tragedy. Mayer's production eviscerates the core of the opera.

The sets, unlike those in *Traviata* and *Parifal*, lack metaphorical substance of any kind. The Act I set is, to be sure, lively, with splashy Vegas types partying in a manner suggestive of the Duke's sixteenth-century court. There's a lot of neon signage; the atmosphere is casino-like. There's a lot going on visually, but to what end? On either side of the stage there are elevators going up. In a newly added prologue, Rigoletto is seen ushering Gilda into the elevator and up to the top of the structure, as indicated by the elevator's flashing light. He is spied upon by Marullo. Since the libretto already makes clear that Marullo is aware of Rigoletto's secret, why is this scene necessary?

The elevators become significant in Act II, because the one on stage left goes up to Rigoletto's home and the one on stage right to Count Ceprano's. In Act II the casino is partially blocked by a gate-like structure with circles, which, I guess, is supposed to suggest the enclosed garden outside Rigoletto's house—in a remote part of town according to the libretto. During the abduction, Rigoletto is sent up the elevator on stage right "to wait" outside Count Ceprano's place, while the courtiers use the elevator on stage left to kidnap Gilda (and drug Giovanna.) All of this becomes very confusing and contrived because in Act I it appears that Rigoletto and Gilda must live on a higher floor in the casino/hotel. Act III takes place in a lounge where the couriers are all sprawled out in a

drunken stupor. When Monterone, the Arab sheikh, is dragged through the room by the Duke's goons and bemoans the inefficacy of his curse, he is promptly dispatched with a single pistol shot. Another liberty taken for no apparent reason. About Act IV, there is little to say other than, as above, there is the suggestion of a strip club. And, I am not the only one to notice that Gilda's body, which is unceremoniously dumped into the trunk of a car, is to be disposed of in "the river." Why pick this point to remain true to the libretto? This is Las Vegas, a desert. But according to Mayer, "The idea that you'd dump the body in the trunk of a car and drive it to some little gulch somewhere way out in the desert seemed really probable to me."

The production is incoherent in other ways as well. The supertitles read as contemporary English, but run afoul of the spirit of the opera when they devolve into the argot of the period, as in "You're really irresistible, baby" and "You send me to the moon!" The audience twitters, of course, for no reason other than the unseemly introduction of 50s-speak. Here is a case where the failure to respect opera's otherness turns pathos into travesty. The Duke's language of seduction is not intended to a source of humor. Here, the production opens up an ironic distance between the audience and the tragedy, broadly winking at whole affair. Moving back and forth between Vegas and Verdi, Mayer's production flounders. The elision of otherness robs the operatic experience of its emotional verisimilitude. Bringing *Rigoletto* to Las Vegas, Mayer asks of the audience to believe with its mind. Part of opera's otherness is that it compels the audience to believe with its heart—against all logic and visual cueing.

In the end, Mayer offers no interpretive nuance, no revelatory gesture that would redeem this otherwise incoherent production. It is as though he simply transplanted the primary text into an alien and inapt socio-historical space where it festers, disconnected from any context in which its essential drama might be realized. Visually novel and entertaining, it asks us to ignore the extent to which meaning loses its bearings amidst gimmickry, and the irreducibly other succumbs to the banality of pop culture iconography. If Decker's *Traviata* distills the drama to an essential set of symbols and Girard's *Parsifal* enacts, in boldly visual terms, the opera's underlying gynophobia, Mayer's staging of *Rigoletto* manages to trivialize the opera even as he claims that "it's up to us, as interpretive artists, to help illuminate the story in new ways for new audiences."

I have hoped to offer a reasonable framework—my own, of course—within which the conceptual staging of an opera can be "read" productively, with a view to enlarging and complicating our sense of what opera should look like and "mean." Can a given production be seen to legitimately stretch what we imagine to be some authentic or "ur" version of an opera, what I have called the primary text, even as we put such term under erasure (to borrow a term from deconstruction)? I believe it can, provided, among other things, that the "otherness" of opera is respected. It is possible that the vast majority of operagoers won't give a

damn one way or the other whether an unorthodox production of this or that opera makes any sense, given the popularity of the Vegas *Rigoletto*. Nevertheless, I was so moved by the HD productions of *La Traviata* and *Parsifal* that I felt compelled to think in greater depth about “the concept” and to “close read” the production the way I might a film or a literary text with a view to understanding its power to signify.

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