

OPERA IN SOUTH AFRICA DURING THE FIRST DEMOCRATIC DECADE

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THE ABSTRACT

Opera in South Africa during the first democratic decade

The author set out to investigate operatic works that were written in South Africa between 1994 and 2004. Original works that included African elements were of interest as was their classification as operas, musical theatre or music drama. Their artistic merit and the process followed in writing successful works in this genre were investigated. Not only was the collaboration between composer and librettist scrutinised, but also the initial stage during which the conception for these theatrical works took shape.

Due to the empirical nature of the research, data was collected mostly via interviews held with composers, librettists, directors and conductors of original works written and performed in the said period. The data is presented in six chapters, each one providing a full description of casting details, synopses and brief analyses of the works.

In the **Preface** the premise upon which the research rests is discussed, while the **Introduction** serves to highlight various issues concerning modern opera and fusion works that have played an important role in providing the groundwork for contemporary ethnic opera in this country. Original works are discussed in each chapter, and a critical evaluation is presented in an Appendix.

The author concludes that much effort was expended by pioneers in the fields of music, theatre and dance to create new works and organise performances. What emerged, furthermore, was that many of the works analysed could not be categorised as 'opera' but rather as 'musical theatre' or 'music drama'. It would also seem that uninitiated audiences first need to be made conscious of the aesthetic value of the genre before they may be able to appreciate it.

Operatic production companies have always been at the forefront when it comes to decision – making regarding which and whose work shall be performed. Funding is crucial to the success of any production and plays an equally important role in eventually determining a positive outcome. This aspect has, therefore, also been included as part of the research project.

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PREFACE

It is the aim of this research to introduce significant original operatic works that have been written and/or performed in South Africa since 1994. Rather than providing an in-depth analysis of each work, I have attempted to describe its essence as well as place it in context regarding the genres that are closely affiliated to opera. These are difficult to define, yet there are certain guidelines that separate the operatic works from those that fall into the categories of 'musical theatre' and 'music drama'. In the process of examining each work, I drew comparisons with others in order to clarify their various structural and stylistic differences.

The purpose of this dissertation is threefold, namely -

1. to serve as a report regarding original, significant 'music dramas'¹ or 'musical theatre'² written and performed shortly before and in the decade following the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994. For the purposes of the dissertation, the term 'music drama' can be taken to describe works of a serious dramatic nature that are not necessarily integrated in the sense of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, whereas the term 'musical theatre' is used to describe works that tend more towards the 'musical' component - of special interest being the way in which South African indigenous ethnic elements have been assimilated;
2. to state what the format of these works is, and to investigate whether or not they conform to a pattern that may emerge when one looks at them as a genre in a historical context. An analysis of the material that inspired the composer or librettist initially will reveal to a large extent the artistic end result, the creative process in each case therefore having been based upon the initial stimulus provided by the source. In the final chapter similarities and differences are highlighted to help define what appears to be stylistic trends of the period;
3. to offer a critique on performances of these works by analysing the views of local and, where applicable, international critics as well as the comments made by the artistic directors involved in the staging of the works themselves. Success cannot be measured solely by the given number of performances a particular work might have enjoyed either locally or internationally, since the availability of finance, moral support and other logistic and strategic factors all play a role in determining such success. Artistic merit, rather than commercial success should be the only criterion taken into consideration. It is accordingly relevant to outline in the introduction exactly what writers of 'South African' opera aim to achieve and how they interact with librettists and producers in arriving at a complex art form of this nature.

¹ Music Drama: Term used frequently throughout the history of music for a dramatic work with music, and particularly one in which music plays a primary role (ed. Macey 2006).

² Musical Theatre: a term often used to characterise a kind of opera production in which spectacle and dramatic impact are emphasised more than purely musical factors (ed. Macey 2006).

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INTRODUCTION

Any discussion of South African opera as a genre or style is a complex undertaking. The question regarding whether composers have written 'South African Opera' (which in this dissertation is defined as a genre that includes assimilated indigenous ethnic elements by way of dance, music and language), or 'Opera in South Africa' (works that do not reflect any form of national identity) will resolve itself as I scrutinise the various compositions under discussion. A further consideration will be given to Africanised opera. Accordingly there are three categories to be considered in this study: South African opera, Opera in South Africa and Africanised opera. For the purposes of the dissertation, the broad scope of the topic has been narrowed down to addressing two central questions - (1) have composers written operas that may be regarded as opera in the true sense of the word, and if so, then (2) can they be categorised as South African opera?

It is firstly necessary to define opera and the other associated genres. Grove Music Online (ed. Macey: 2006) gives the following definition:

The word 'opera' signifies a drama in which the actors and actresses sing throughout. There are, however, so many exceptions among the operatic works of the West – so many works popularly called operas in which some parts are spoken or mimed – that the word should be more generically defined as a drama in which the actors and actresses sing some or all of their parts.

The New Harvard Dictionary of Music (ed. Randel: 1986) provides another definition:

That opera is primarily sung distinguishes it from dramatic pieces in which music is incidental or clearly subsidiary to the drama. That it is presented theatrically distinguishes it from oratorio, which has similar musical components.

What then constitutes a 'genre' as applicable to the topic of this study - works where the music does not drive the dramatic purpose of the piece? Here one would consider those works where music does not provide the primary driving force for the action. Such works are often classified as being 'music theatre'. The New Harvard Dictionary of Music (ed. Randel: 1986) defines 'music theatre' in the 20th century as 'the combination of elements from music and drama in new forms distinct from traditional opera. Although some action is usually specified, music theatre is normally non-realistic and often non-representational'. Grove Music Online (ed. Macey: 2006), however, gives a slightly different definition:

A term often used to characterise a kind of opera production in which spectacle and dramatic impact are emphasised over purely musical factors.

These definitions are obviously applicable to works as diverse as Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* and Andrew Lloyd-Webber's *Cats*. The South African works to be discussed that fall into this category, however, differ markedly from the two examples mentioned in that they are not only realistic but also representational. For this reason it would be more accurate to classify such works as 'musicals', even though this term is more generally applied to lighter works. The defining factor here would be the manner in which the action and the music interact.

- In a 'musical', events that have been spoken and acted are repeated in song.

- In 'musical theatre', speech and action are followed by song that carries the libretto forward.
- In opera, the action is promulgated through music.

The emergence of a musical play or play with music, in fact, a 'lighter' or more popular form of opera (such as Rock opera) /folk opera simulated the structures and essence of the traditional genre. This has led to the demarcations between 'opera' and 'the musical' in the works discussed being blurred. Grove Music Online (ed. Macey:2006) defines 'the musical' (originally 'musical comedy') as follows:

The abbreviation to 'musical' happened within about 20 years from around 1940, suggesting that the dramatic qualities shown by such qualifiers as 'comedy', 'play', 'romance' and 'farce' were subsumed within an increasingly established and identifiable genre of the 'musical'.

Often African music elements (complete dances or choral works for example) are used as quotations to colour or flavour certain musical numbers or scenes. It would therefore be more accurate to say that composers and librettists are producing successful 'music theatre' and 'music drama'. If one traces the origin of the primitive art form to Greek tragedy or drama, then we are, in fact, at the brink of defining the essence of African opera: 'Dramma in musica/opera in musica'. Herbert Graf (1941:24) informs us:

The Medicis made Florence the center of the rebirth of the ancient world and here a group of aristocratic amateurs who had studied the musical theories of Hellas planned a revival of Greek drama, in which music is said to have played an important part. For their plays, which they performed in one another's private palace-theatres, they took the stories of Daphne and Euridice from Greek Mythology and set them to a sort of speech-like chanting. Soon the new art became known as *dramma in musica*; then *opera in musica* and finally, just *opera*. The Greek theatre was a folk theatre. (own emphasis)

In order to place the terminology in an African context, I investigated some of the existing opera forms such as Yoruba folk opera and the native air opera. Akin Euba (2000:216/217) discusses three criteria for the definition of folk opera:

- (1) The extent to which music is an integral part of the drama, ...A work may then qualify as a folk opera if more weight is given to sung texts than to spoken texts.
- (2) Whether or not such music occurs in the context of the composer's personal and individual imagination,...there are plays in which music and dance feature, because there are situations that require music (e.g., weddings). Such situational or contextual usages of music should not necessarily qualify a work to be in the category of a folk opera.
- (3) Whether or not texts set to music might ordinarily (in real life) be spoken...In the conventional folk opera, many (but not all) texts that are normally spoken in real life are set to music.

The description of native air opera given above calls to mind one of the features by which grand opera (in which all text is sung) is distinguished from light opera (in which dialogue is spoken and other texts are sung) in the pre-twentieth-century idioms of European music theatre.

Ethnic African tribes have their own rituals that always include singing and dancing to complement a rich heritage of legends and an oral tradition of storytelling. Julius Eichbaum says the following of opera in the African context:

Opera is the art of storytelling set to music and music is very much a part of African culture. As the new South African opera, *Enoch, Prophet of God* revealed when it was premièred earlier this year by CAPAB Opera, opera within the African context is not in the least bit alien. (1995:7)

Just as storytelling is an inherent part of African culture, so too is singing. Patronising as it may sound, Africans are known as a 'singing' nation. Traditionally, singing and dancing form part of everyday life. Music in an African context then has enormous potential to be used to promote and to establish both culture and identity. According to Tom Sutcliffe:

any composer with the theatrical instinct to succeed in opera has quickly recognised the power for propaganda it represents, promoting moral, political and sometimes religious ideas and philosophies under the sugared guise of entertainment. (1996:210)

Opera could then be the ideal genre for expression of not only a people's, but also a nation's new identity through the promotion of nationalist propaganda. The definition of the New Harvard Dictionary of Music (ed. Randel:1986) defines nationalism as follows:

The use in art music of materials that are identifiably national or regional in character. These may include actual folk music, melodies or rhythms that merely recall folk music, and non-musical programmatic elements drawn from national folklore, myth, or literature. This concept of musical nationalism has most often been employed to describe music of the later 19th and early 20th centuries by composers from what were regarded as peripheral countries...

In the 20th century our understanding of opera has changed because of social issues brought about by political tensions within and between countries. A typical example would be 'jazz opera' where the integration and fusion of seemingly separate styles combined because of cross-cultural influences imposed by the events of World War II. Operas composed during these times reflected the tensions of the era. The New Harvard Dictionary of Music (ed. Randel:1986) concludes the following about 20th century opera :

Opera in the century since the death of Wagner has exhibited abundant diversity in terms of subject matter, musical styles, philosophical viewpoints, and aims. Contributing to this diversity was the influence of a number of different artistic and literary movements such as naturalism, impressionism, surrealism, and symbolism.

South Africa is currently a country in search of a national identity following on from the events of the first democratic elections in 1994. That being the case we should be witnessing a period of national consciousness. In Frantz Fanon's words:

The first necessity is the re-establishment of the nation in order to give life to national culture in the strictly biological sense of the phrase...Culture plunges its roots into the physical reality of the environmental humus in which it develops, and it reflects the organic nature of the society, which may be more or less influenced by external factors...culture allows us to know the dynamic syntheses which have been developed and established by social conscience to resolve these conflicts at each stage of its evolution, in the search for survival and progress. (1993:50,55)

For the purposes of the present study, I postulate that works written since 1994 based on an African theme with the assimilation of local references, be regarded as 'South African opera', regardless of the nationality of the composer. This follows the approach of John Tyrrell (1988:ix) when he takes 'Czech opera simply to be opera composed to Czech texts'.

To understand this, it is necessary to study what happened to opera in certain Western European countries during similar periods of reform. In Czechoslovakia Smetana was the first composer to use Czech texts at a time when composers were driven to choosing their own subject matter for librettos. These were chiefly based on either Czech history (derived from legends or myths about Libuše³) or Czech town or village life. Because the audiences preferred the more patriotic themes, composers needed to satisfy their needs if they wished their operas to succeed. The forest was a favourite setting. John Tyrrell states:

...as in most Czech opera, the forest and its supernatural periphery is essentially friendly, unlike in German opera where a darker side is also evident, as in the Wolf's Glen scene of *Der Freischütz*, which initiated a whole genre of German operatic Schauerromantik. (1988:135)

The use of folksongs and dances in their operas bore an uneasy resemblance (because of the cross-cultural influence) to the neighbouring Germanic counterparts. The text reflected a Czech flavour, as for example in Smetana's folklike chorus scenes and his use of strophic songs (not derived from existing folk material). Glinka also composed his own Russian-sounding melodies that defined the libretto. His *A life for the Tsar* was the first Russian opera without spoken dialogue and in which 'he set out to unite the principles of dramatic music with those of national music in an unprecedented "organic" fashion, a feature imparting to the opera a sense of being almost self-consciously 'advanced' so that one might speak of a foreshadowing of the leitmotiv technique' (Richard Taruskin 1981:2/3).

Taruskin quotes Vladimir Stasov:

Nationalism was taken then (in the thirties) in its most limited meaning, and so it was then thought that in order to impart national character to his work an artist had to put into it, as if into a new setting, that which already existed among the people, created by their spontaneous instinct. People sought and demanded the impossible: the amalgamation of old materials with new art. They forgot that the old materials belonged to their own time and that a new art, which had already succeeded in working out its own forms, needed new materials as well...National character is contained not in melodies, but in the general nature of the work, in the *aggregate of the most diverse and extensive conditions*. (1981:7,8)

It appears that a national character is in essence a collective feeling or energy that becomes manifest in a cultural environment. This has not yet taken place in South Africa.

In order to establish the reason for South Africa not experiencing similar trends of nationalism in its art forms when compared with European countries in the 19th century, one has to consider the effects of colonisation. It was customary for colonisers to eradicate existing native cultures in order to impose their own ideals and culture. Grant Olwage writes:

Quite later, 'The Kaffir Express' restated the myth: 'The Kaffirs do not appear to have had any airs of their own' (Aug 1874:1). The basis of the claim was that a land without any music was fair game for the musical colonist (see Pratt 1992:52) for the application of this argument to colonialism in general...So when Lovedale's singing evangelists ventured into 'heathen kraals', it was with the conviction that the people 'have no music of any kind', that the missionaries were giving music *per se* along with the Word. (2003:34)

In the case of British colonialism, European touring companies with a strong eurocentric approach set the standard. At a much later stage domination was supplanted by Afrikaans

³ The legendary founder of Prague.

Nationalism which glorified the Apartheid regime. Black artists in general, and black singers and musicians in particular, led boycotts of South African Arts Councils because they were subsidised by the Nationalist Government.

Since the democratic elections of 1994 and the acceptance of a new Constitution for the country, the Bill of Rights has given black people and notably black singers the opportunity to change inequity at all levels, including the face of opera in South Africa. The question is whether, given sufficient time and training, a new identity for South African opera will emerge. We have all the basic requirements. There are many singers who, with intensive short-term training, produce big beautiful sounds similar to their Italian counterparts of the 19th century. South Africa's rich cultural heritage lends itself to operatic treatment. Opera by its very nature is the art form that can encompass all the arts in a single unit while espousing nationalist fervour. How have these factors impacted on the creation of new works, and have developments on the socio-political or cultural scene indeed inspired composers to express post-colonial traits or modernism in their writing? Christopher Ballantine reports:

the moment of euphoria around 1994 was short-lived. It was in jeopardy from the beginning, and moribund within little more than two years of the election. At the heart of this decline was sustained pressure from the US and some of its partners (Britain, Germany, Italy and Japan) that the ANC, and after 1994 the new government, should abandon the socialist elements in its economic policies, give up on nationalisation, and submit to the imperatives of neo-liberalism and the West's idea of the free market. (2004:113)

How this statement is reflected in the operas that have been written will be discussed in the conclusion.

We are now all living in a global village and it makes no difference whether there are British-born or Hungarian-born South Africans writing opera in South Africa today. What is important is that the works of these composers reflect the cultural, social and philosophical, if not ideological, viewpoints of South Africans. If one compares current South African opera to the initial national status of Czech or Russian opera, for example, then one finds that the written texts are often based, as in these other countries, on local folklore, yet the musical language, as a whole, fails to express the spirit of Africa.

What then makes an opera South African? One could argue that it relies on the use of Xhosa or Zulu dances, instruments, traditional songs and even the language, but this does not take into account the Neo-Western idiom that determines the majority of the melody lines in the supporting orchestral part. Akin Euba states:

Although African composers whose training has been in Western music usually incorporate elements of African culture into their works, these elements tend to be lost because they are presented in a stylistic context that is overwhelmingly Western. It is difficult for average Africans to relate to the works of such composers, and the question therefore arises about the relevance of these works to the African society. (2000:207)

In Slavic countries such as Czechoslovakia for example, there was one language that united the people even though there may have been more than one dialect. In South Africa there are 11 official languages and numerous dialects to choose from.

National identity becomes a challenging factor when one realises that apart from language barriers there exists the reality of diverse cultures. Given the present time and climate it might be more meaningful to nurture the diversity that exists in South African culture rather than attempt to forge an integrated unit. Herbert Vilakazi maintains:

Actually, each community needs its own Native club, which is not exclusive, but initially focuses on the wounds that white supremacy and racism inflicted on the souls of every community in our society. Then step by step we can merge the discussions, compare the peculiar injuries suffered by each community, and finally all participate in the healing of everyone and every community. (2006:36)

When examining the current situation in South Africa, one needs to bear in mind recent cultural developments in Europe where certain groups are becoming aware of the danger of losing valuable elements that are fundamental to their culture in the face of a shift towards the all-consuming American influence. It is possible that South Africa with its tapestry of individual cultures may lead the way to a reconsideration of individually appropriate cultural norms in future. Talking about opera in Czechoslovakia, Ladislav Sip (1955:74-76) writes how

delightful it was at the National Theatre, to watch the animated faces of an excursion of school children, the expressions of the farmers and of the workers from the factories, listening deeply, absorbed in the music, enjoying the beauty of the melody and following with close interest the action on the stage. Here, indeed, we find fulfilled the key slogan of the culture of the new people's democratic state: *Art for the People*.

This raises the question of whether the majority of people living in South Africa today (or the rest of the world) are interested in opera as a genre (as a form of high art) or whether they are seeking a more popular theatrical form of entertainment. If the latter turns out to be the case, it would suggest that opera needs to be more accessible since the competition with multi-media productions and the commercial market is a reality. My opinion is that opera as a genre has survived, especially in South Africa, and that one needs to raise the general public's level of awareness regarding its existence before one can in fact make it more appealing to the masses. Contemporary South African opera could be seen to be representative of a new blending of 'popular' styles, which in turn could be an indication of a new national identity that is starting to be forged.

Opera has survived because one cannot inhibit the creativity of artists. They work with whatever material is available or inspiring. Sometimes the motivation to write an opera stems from a commission, such as *Enoch, Prophet of God*, in which instance the writing of it becomes a matter of honour coupled with financial reward. Often the creative process is sparked by inspiration from reading (or even writing) a novel based on an existing story or legend, such as *Amarantha*. Sometimes the music is not regarded as being equal to the script since it is often subjected to the dictates of badly-written texts, as in *earthdiving*, for example. In spite of this it often transcends the script in beauty and artistic merit. In the end, the work is the property of the composer and not the librettist, and therefore it is the responsibility of the former to ensure that the music is the primary consideration when there is collaboration with librettists. Music provides the energy for productions even though it co-exists on a different level with theatre.

In the nineteenth century, opera was an eagerly sought-after form of entertainment that appealed to many. Today, cinema has assumed that role in appealing to the masses. Yet there are sizable audiences who year after year regularly attend productions of the same works by, for example,

Verdi and Puccini. In these productions the cinematic medium has been borrowed in some of the directing and staging techniques used. Revolving sets, clever lighting effects, projections and various modern technical devices create a continuity that was impossible to achieve in the past. This can be attributed to the fact that directors have learnt to be more innovative. Since the theatrical aspect of opera has grown in status, the ideals of Romantic opera have made way for a more contemporary approach where box-office success is determined by audiences.

As a consequence and because the majority of opera-goers seem to prefer Puccini, Mozart, Verdi and other such established composers, there has been a trend in South Africa - as there has been in America too - to modernise (in South Africa: Africanise) the works by these composers. Local composers are commissioned to condense works and to re-orchestrate, often by including African instruments (mostly percussive), thus creating an entirely new work. Such a practice could be classified as contextual transfer.

This was very much the case with a Cape Town Opera/UCT Opera School production of Verdi's *Macbeth* at the Artscape Theatre, performed in September 2001 to celebrate the centenary of Verdi's death. *Macbeth* was truncated to a one-act work lasting ninety minutes, and set in the African bush. The opera was reworked by Péter Louis van Dijk who added an alto saxophone solo to the *Brindisi* scene as well as African percussion, yet kept the basic Verdian sound.



Tina Mene as Lady Macbeth in a scene from the September 2001 production at the Artscape Theatre.

Vocal lines were left virtually untouched, but accompaniments to choruses and recitatives were reworked, as were the harmonies linking sections, and the supernatural scenes. Brett Bailey's production-concept was akin to theatre-in-the-round, but in this case singers and audience shared the stage area. The audience was 'transported' via the scene to a wasteland somewhere in post-colonial Africa, physically being able to smell the smoke and the witches' brew. This rewritten version successfully married the diverse styles of Europe and Africa.

Another 're-write', which was performed by Cape Town Opera in December 1997 at the Artscape Opera House, was *La Bohème: Noir* (The Black Bohemian). In this case Puccini's music was kept intact as far as the melody and orchestration were concerned, but the libretto was jettisoned, resetting the story in Soweto. In Hal Shaper's translation of the new work *Bohemia*, as 'a state of mind', is paralleled in *La Bohème: Noir* as a 'state of mindlessness'. Shaper writes:

La Bohème was set in the Paris of 1830, against the background of the same revolution so compellingly portrayed in *Les Misérables*. *La Bohème: Noir* parallels the political censorship, repression and violence of the Apartheid years. South Africa had become not so much a state of mind, as a State of Mindlessness; of everyday cruelty, poverty and despair. This *La Bohème* is set in Johannesburg on Republic Day, 31 May 1976, two weeks before the Children's Uprising of 16 June and the savage aftermath, in which Hector Petersen was the first to die. (1997)

Questions have been raised about the artistic value of these revised works with purists arguing that the composer's text should not be tampered with.



Male soloists in a scene from *La Bohème: Noir* at the Artscape Theatre in December 1997.

Translations of existing works into a local language create further difficulties. The counterargument of course is that the majority of the population would never come into contact with Italian, German or French opera if it were not made accessible. Here one may cite the recent screen version by the self-styled *South African Academy of the Performing Arts* (later known as *Dimpho Di Kopane*) of *uCarmen eKhayelitsha*. Township life is highlighted, and the well-adapted script emphasises the violence often associated with this environment.

Another opera that lends itself easily to fusion with the African style is *The Beggar's Opera*. It was written by John Gay in 1728, consists of popular folk songs of the time, and is a direct satire on the luxurious opera productions in vogue then. The South African version of this street-opera, first performed by *Dimpho Di Kopane* on 22 February 2002 at the Joseph Stone Theatre in Athlone and two years later at the Spier Amphitheatre, is an attempt to fuse Baroque (Old England) and African (contemporary South Africa) elements. The production was staged at Wilton's Music Hall, London, in the autumn of 2002.

It is not only the 'fusion-productions' that seem to work, but also those that have different styles co-existing side-by-side. This is the case with Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, performed by Cape Town Opera at the Spier Amphitheatre from 12- 27 January 2002. Here Purcell's music, as scored for Baroque chamber orchestra, is set against a percussion ensemble - both the prologue and epilogue and passages in the body of the work being structured from original music in an authentic African style created by Dizu Plaatjies and members of *Amampondo*.



Sibongile Mngoma in *Dido & Aeneas* at the Spier Amphitheatre in January 2002.

Translations and fusions do well, but lack of finance and sponsorship impact severely on the writing and staging of new productions, a composer almost having to create a demand before there can be a supply of such works. This can clearly be seen in the case of Hendrik Hofmeyr's operas, for example, whose potential will never be realised if there is no demand for them.

The staging of Thomas Rajna's *Amarantha* can largely be attributed to the efforts of the composer, who was determined to finance the project. He was successful in raising contributions from the City Council, National Arts Council, Oude Meester Foundation and Business & Arts South Africa (Basa). The same circumstances applied to his next opera, *Valley Song* which was realised with the support of the Spier Arts Trust, National Arts Council, Arts and Culture Trust (Act), Basa, Nedbank and the National Lottery.

Rajna experienced the lack of finance and interest and or commitment of sponsors to opera as a limitation. He spent two-and-a-half years creating *Valley Song*, three months in rehearsal and more than twice that to raise finance. The composer felt that far too much of his time and effort was needed in bringing it all to fruition.⁵

The policy of the old dispensation was to encourage the composition of new South African operas by launching competitions that were accompanied by lucrative prizes. However, the previous government made no real attempt at providing funding for the performance of these works. The Performing Arts' Councils were allocated funding that included a budget for the production of operas, but the artistic directors of their opera departments - with the approval of their Boards - were free to allocate the funds as they saw fit. Most often, they proved loath to perform unknown modern operas since their funding was based on a formula that took into consideration the number of seats sold per performance. This affected the performances of operas in South Africa considerably, as further chapters will demonstrate.

The following reviews, articles and programme notes may be found in Appendix A :⁶

Cape Town Opera. 1997. *La Bohème: Noir*. Hal Shaper. (programme notes)

Eichbaum, J. 1998. 'La Bohème: Noir', *Scenaria*. 205: 10-11.

Eichbaum, J. 1998. A necessary blessing, or, the case for opera in our society, *Scenaria*. 212: 3 - 8

Eichbaum, J. 1998. Why opera 'is' relevant to the new South Africa, *Scenaria*. 178: 3-7.

Fourie, C. 2001. 'Macbeth' dazzles in every department, *The Cape Argus*: September 18. (See appendix A: 15)

Fourie, C. 2002. Baroque meets Africa in 'Dido', *The Cape Argus*: 4out, January 16.

Fourie, C. 2002. 'Beggar's Opera', *The Cape Argus*. (See appendix A: 17)

Irish, D. 2001. Africanised 'Macbeth' is a hit, *The Cape Times*: 7, September 17.

Irish, D. 2002. 'The Beggar's Opera', *The Cape Times*. (See appendix A: 19-20)

Irish, D. 2002. Happy blend of African, baroque art, *The Cape Times*: 7, January 16.

⁵ Personal discussion in an interview with Thomas Rajna, 21 October 2004.

⁶ Where citation is incomplete the appendix page number is given as a reference, (A: 17) for example.

CHAPTER ONE : OPERAS ON A RURAL THEME

AMARANTHA

Based on a short story (*How beautiful with shoes*) by American author, W.D. Steele

Composer and Librettist Thomas Rajna
Conductor Christopher Dowdeswell
Director Angelo Gobbato

Premièred at Artscape on 25 November 2000

Soloists from Cape Town Opera/Demindex Opera Studio and UCT Opera School

Characters	Voice type	First Performance Cast
Mare Doggett (Amarantha)	mezzo soprano	Veramarie Meyer
Mrs Doggett, Mare's mother	contralto	Heste-Marie White
Humble Jewett	baritone	Brad Liebl
Ruby Herter, Mare's fiancé	tenor	Derrick Ellis
Older Haskins, Mare's uncle	bass	Charles de Flamingh
Farmer Wyker	baritone	Jaco Ferreira
Doc Paradise	tenor	James Skinner
Judge North	bass	Thomas Pludermann
Dr Ryeworth, principal	tenor	Derrick Ellis

Orchestration

Medium-sized orchestra:

Double woodwind

3 Horns

2 Trumpets

2 Trombones

Tuba

Harp

Celeste

Timpani

Percussion

Strings

Synopsis¹

Scene 1: The yard of a Carolina farmstead (1930)

A mad English teacher, Humble Jewett, has broken out of a nearby asylum, where he has been kept for years after killing his school principal and trying to strangle a female student.

A young girl, Mare, says goodbye to her fiancé, Ruby, who joins the search party to find Humble. On arriving home Mare finds a stranger with her deaf mother and realises that it is the

¹ Condensed version of synopsis found in programme notes, by kind permission of Thomas Rajna.

lunatic, Humble. He is attracted to Mare and the poetic name her mother calls her, *Amarantha*. Mare finds an excuse to escape to the fields but he follows her.

Scene 2: The open countryside

Humble tries to kidnap Mare and after requesting her love finds that she is repulsed by him and fearful. He begins to rage but when Ruby arrives on the scene with the search party, he is rendered harmless. The girl returns, devastated .

Scene 3: The parlour of the Doggett farmhouse

Mare's uncle tells everyone about the madman who is now locked up in the courthouse jail.

Scene 4: In the open

Mare discovers that the animals have been frightened by the flames coming from the burning courthouse. Humble, responsible for the fire, has killed the guard and broken out once more. He captures Mare at the barn and drags her off to the hillside.

Scene 5: A small sheltered thicket on the hill side

Being with Amarantha unlocks Humble's pent-up feelings and longings for love and redemption. He undoes her hair while reciting poetry to the bewildered girl. He seizes her and they go off into the night.



A scene from *Amarantha*.

Scene 6: Parlour of Wyker's dilapidated farmhouse on Coward Hill

Humble sits the petrified Mare down on the sofa in the parlour and recites to her Solomon's 'Song of Songs'. Mare's outburst: 'No, don't talk so!' triggers recollections of his confrontation with Dr Ryeworth regarding his teaching of biblical 'sacred allegory' as love poetry. Humble raves, reliving his discovery of Ryeworth being intimate with the female student Blossom and the events that led to murder. Unconsciously, Mare becomes the victim but saves herself by screaming. Humble begs for release, seeing her as Mary, Mother of God and eventually falls asleep, his head on her lap.

Farmer Wyker, arriving home in a drunken state, is shocked and sobered by what he sees. He indicates that Mare should move away and then he shoots the sleeping Humble.

Scene 7: The parlour of the Doggett farmhouse

Mare cannot get over the experiences of the night before. The slow-witted, inarticulate country girl struggles to come to terms with the intensity of Humble's passion. She now looks upon her mundane existence with utter disdain. 'Is it only crazy folk who ever say such things?' she wonders. She resists her mother's caring gestures and is repulsed by Ruby's attempt at affection. Alone and in a state of melancholy she ponders... 'It is the cheap false pretence that lives, the tawdry lie, but always we let beauty die...'

Discussion of *Amarantha*

Amarantha is an opera, or 'music drama', as the composer prefers to call it, with a dark undertone. Carl Fourie (2000:2) offers the following critique:

Much of the writing is meandering or seething, intense emotion, desperately seeking resolution. More musical variation in a work of dark intrigue would have been welcome. Scene six is the only scene where the much-needed comic relief is provided.

John Allison (2002:94) writes as follows in a BBC Magazine:

The live recording is less than ideal, but it captures the moody claustrophobia of the piece and shows how Rajna's sinewy music drives the action along – a virtue many new operas lack.

When asked whether he would consider adapting the opera to a typically South African setting, Rajna replied that he would not do so willingly.² His primary objection was concern for the subtleties that would be lost; and then he was also concerned about an inherent insincerity. In a discussion with him, he pointed out that 'to be politically correct is not always being honest'.

It will be of interest to see whether Rajna's colleagues share his view on the matter. No attempt was made to give the music an American flavour, yet there is a hint of square-dance in scene 3, and a popular ditty, 'Brown's Ferry Blues' taken from a book of folk tunes appears in scene 6. 'O Western Wind' is an eighteenth-century English poem that is set to resemble an old English

² Personal communication in an interview with Thomas Rajna, 21 October 2004.

folk song. In the case of the square-dance, it appears as music with dialogue; and together with 'O Western Wind' (Rajna's own tune), represents an example of references containing no thematic borrowing, but which suggest style and rhythm for the intended effect. 'Brown's Ferry Blues' on the other hand, is an example of a re-interpretation of an extraneous piece.

The structure of the work contains no formal recitatives or arias, but the voices are entwined in the general symphonic texture of the material. This resembles Wagner's use of texture which in turn explains Rajna's preference for 'music drama' - a direct reference to Wagner's compositional technique. Themes are developed and transformed throughout the work, the Prelude returning at the end of scene 6.

There are also many other unifying elements and references that could be the subject for a detailed analysis. Rajna, in an interview with Beverley Brommert, describes his music as:

Contemporary lyricism. My music for *Amarantha* is allusive and persuasive, there are no leitmotifs, just motifs that are not tied to any specific character or place. I've kept it supple and transferable. (2000:2)

Recurring themes are used to portray certain moods but are not linked to characters as in Wagner operas. Guy Willoughby comments:

Rajna's score exposes at the beginning a number of musical themes, broadly suggestive of longing or desire in conflict with darker forces, which are augmented, developed and refined throughout in symphonic rather than classic operatic style. Eshewing the classical formula of set aria and recitative, with the orchestra chiefly present as accompaniment to the singers, Rajna makes the vocalists integral components of his musical structure - each voice one instrument among many. (2000:3)

Humble Jewett's mood is described by a descending semitone and a sixth, but this changes when he becomes poetic. This motif first appears in scene 2 when Humble kidnaps Mare. As he becomes more obsessed with her, the motif is heard in diminution and becomes the 'capture music' in scene 4.

In personal conversations, Rajna has mentioned the influence of the structuring of J.S. Bach's final choruses from the *St Matthew Passion* and *St John Passion* as well as the opening of Act 3 of Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*.

In the preface to the opera, Rajna writes:

Music lovers will not be slow to recognise a couple of elements in my music, deliberately introduced as timeless, universal symbols. The first one is a series of rising, melancholy thirds, as at the beginning of the third act of Wagner's *Tristan*, the most powerful expression of longing and doom of all times. When Jewett in Scene VI is under the delusion that he bears Christ's own martyrdom ('Take me down gently when you take me from the tree'), the music approaches the outlines of the final mourning chorus of Bach's *St John Passion* and the sound of the tragic final cadence of the *St Matthew Passion*.

None of these elements are quoted literally, or are used as 'objets trouvés', like Mahler is in Berio's *Sinfonia*. They are absorbed into the texture and generate their power of association from within the structure.

The musical references are inserted and presented as a clear evocation of the text. In this instance the rising thirds from *Tristan* lead into the Bach reference. Although Rajna does not regard these

as literal quotations that can be picked up at a first hearing, they are used as universal symbols that are worked into the thread of the material. Guy Willoughby argues:

Rajna's haunting interweave of themes is so compelling, it's a wonder to rise after less than two hours and realize one has travelled an imaginative journey of truly epic proportions. *Amarantha* deserves to enter the repertoire – and not just the South African one either. (2000:3)

Rajna has indicated the influence of Baroque symbolism in his music, but Britten's influence, with regard to the text - which Rajna claims to be unintentional - can further be seen in the reference to *Peter Grimes*. John Allison (2000:94) and Barry Smith (2001:359) both refer to it.

Based on a short story by the American author, Wilbur Daniel Steele, it is set in Thirties Carolina, where Humble Jewett, a Peter Grimes-like figure, abducts the simple country girl Amarantha.³

The libretto (by Rajna himself) reduces the story to its bare essentials yet retains the essential imagery and largely religious symbolism which draws on the biblical *Song of Songs* and a theme of love and redemption. In many ways there is something of *Peter Grimes* about the piece.⁴

Amarantha's chief merit lies in its dramatic strength, rich orchestration and thematic construction. Its weakness lies in the frequent scene changes that disrupt the flow of the piece. Deon Irish notes:

The score is lushly conceived, Rajna obtaining surprisingly full sonorities from a moderately sized orchestra, which does run to triple [sic] winds, however. This is not mere indulgence; the wind writing is striking in its prominence and effectiveness. Rajna is, of course, an assured orchestrator; but I cannot recall another work in which the winds play so dominant a role. For the rest, the use of musical interludes – after the example of Britten – is most effective and affords opportunity for some symphonically- conceived passages; but in more traditionally accompanimental roles, the orchestration is often too overbearing.⁵ (2000:10)

Further discussion of these aspects, however, falls beyond the scope and nature of this study, and may be fruitfully investigated in a more detailed, analytical work.

Classification

Amarantha cannot be classified as a South African work as it is based on an American story by an American author, and there are references to English and American folk tunes.

Categorisation

This is an example of 'music drama' where recurring themes unify the work into a continuous whole. It is of a serious dramatic nature and the actors sing all their parts.

³ John Allison – BBC Music Magazine, November 2002.

⁴ Barry Smith – Opera, March 2001.

⁵ Deon Irish – Cape Times 29 November, 2000. Refer to the orchestral division which gives only double winds.

VALLEY SONG

Based on the play by Athol Fugard

Music Thomas Rajna
Libretto Guy Willoughby
Director Steven Stead
Conductor Graham Scott

Première by Cape Town Opera for the Spier Summer Arts Festival: 3 March 2005
 Further performances until 12 March 2005

Characters

Buks Jonkers (Oupa)
Veronica Jonkers, his granddaughter
Whiteman (Stephen Millar)
Mrs Oliphant, the Post Mistress
Brigadier de Wet
Police Sergeant
Stella, a cleaner lady and village busy-body
TV Singer
14 – 16 village people

Voice type

baritone
 soprano
 tenor
 mezzo soprano
 bass baritone
 tenor
 contralto
 soprano
 choir

First Performance Cast

Ronald Theys
 Angela Kerrison
 Derrick Ellis
 Christina Farr
 Brad Liebl
 Cecil Peters
 Sophie Harmsen
 Nokrimesi Skota
 ComArt Choristers

Orchestration

2 Flutes (2nd doubling Piccolo)
 2 Oboes (2nd doubling Cor Anglais)
 2 Clarinets (2nd doubling Bass Clarinet)
 2 Bassoons (2nd doubling Contra Bassoon)
 3 Horns in F
 3 Trumpets in B flat
 2 Trombones
 Tuba
 Timpani
 Percussion (2 players)
 Celeste/Electric Organ
 Strings

Synopsis⁶

ACT I

Scene 1: The front yard of Buks's dwelling

Buks remembers the good times as he recalls the bumper crops he once had and the Italian prisoner-of-war who sang Verdi arias.

⁶ Condensed version of synopsis found in programme notes, by kind permission of Thomas Rajna.

Veronica brings the tea, marches around like a true cadet, and they discuss Whiteman's intention of buying the Landman property. This is a major concern for Buks who has worked the land as a tenant farmer. Veronica expresses her need to leave for the big city where she can realize her dream of becoming a singing star. Buks becomes upset since it reminds him of his daughter Caroline, Veronica's mother, who left never to return. Veronica wants to know about her late mother. We learn that after Veronica was orphaned in Johannesburg, it was Ouma Betty, Buks's late wife, who brought her back home.

Veronica, now a seventeen-year-old girl is questioned by Buks about the menu for supper, and they play a marching game.

Scene 2: The yard of Mrs Jooste's cottage

By standing on an apple box, Veronica is able to watch a TV show (*Tomorrow's Stars*) through the window of Mrs Jooste's sitting room. Veronica joins in with the contestant who sings 'Nature Boy'. When Whiteman sees this he tries to discourage her from following a singing career, but he is unsuccessful. She leaves and he reflects on his unfulfilled visions.

Scene 3: In church

After the service, Stella breaks the news that Whiteman is buying the land. Buks is depressed but Veronica tries to cheer him up with talk of reform and 'winds of change'. Buks is ready to accept the fact of having to work for an owner and plans to offer Veronica's services as a cleaner. She is taken aback and clearly shows her feelings about the matter. This angers Buks as he recalls the pride with which her Ouma Betty worked in the same Landman house.

Scene 4: Outside the village inn

Buks, bearing gifts of vegetables, intercepts Whiteman as he prepares to go to Port Elizabeth. After this encounter Buks is, however, still in the dark regarding the land issue. Buks's generous gifts, including pumpkins, play a deciding factor in Whiteman's decision to buy the land. He has visions of his future agricultural success and sings of his 'Country House'.

Scene 5: Outside Mrs Jooste's sitting-room window

Veronica is on her apple box, watching another TV show. She is interrupted by Whiteman who tells her that Mrs Jooste is dead. He uses the situation to his advantage to discourage her from pursuing a singing career and offers her the servant's job. He tries to strengthen his argument by telling her that she will be just too eager to accept his proposition after she returns, down-and-out with a baby on her back. Her reply is nothing but derisory, and once again she rejects his offer.

Scene 6: In town

Veronica entertains some white tourists by singing to them. This is how she earns money to save for her trip to Johannesburg. The scene changes and she sings to an imaginary audience: 'The wind is blowing.'

Scene 7: The post office

Brigadier de Wet enters as Mrs Oliphant is about to close the Post Office. She refuses to serve him and an argument ensues. Eventually she calls on the police sergeant at the station next door to forcefully remove the Brigadier. The crowd of villagers revel in the embarrassment of the angry Brigadier.

ACT II**Scene 8: Buks's parlour**

Veronica asks Buks for a letter that was addressed to her. He hands it over but asks her to read it out loud. She prevaricates but is forced to reveal the contents when he suspects that she is being untruthful. The letter is from her friend, Priscilla, who is offering her accommodation in Johannesburg. Buks is devastated to think that Veronica has lied to him and enraged when he hears that white people have given her money.

Scene 9: In church

Veronica refrains from singing or praying in church. Buks questions her motive and her reply saddens him: "You have killed the song in me".

Scene 10: A lane near Buks's dwelling

Buks walks the streets till late wondering where his granddaughter's upbringing had gone wrong, his faith dwindling until Veronica finds him and pacifies him.

Scene 11: The Akkers

Veronica finds Buks in the fields and asks his blessing for a new life that involves change. She promises not to follow in her mother's footsteps and then makes a hasty departure. Whiteman meets Buks and suggests that they work together to till the land and yield good crops. This gives Buks renewed vigour even though he has lost his granddaughter.

Veronica, dressed to leave and with suitcase in hand sings: 'You are breaking my heart, Valley that I love'.

Discussion of *Valley Song*

Valley Song is set in the period just after the democratic election that established the Government of National Unity in South Africa (1994) and now, a decade later it has already become a period piece. At that time, the rural areas were still largely isolated from the urban ones, and in the last ten years much has happened to improve communication between them and development in the former. While the libretto deals with past struggles for freedom and human rights, the community reflected in the work has already moved beyond the boundaries enforced by a previous regime and now lives in a more enlightened time. In discussion with the directors I was

made aware of the fact that even though the piece has a universal theme, they were of the opinion that it would not attract audiences on the international stage,⁷ the reasoning being that the piece is now only of real relevance to rural folk in isolated settlements. Sutcliffe argues:

History shows that viable new operas must be national and local. Even a specialized mass audience, as opera has, is rooted in a specific language culture – however much the media, dominated by American cinema and English-language publications, may imply that fashion and culture are internationally homogenized. (1996:59)

Veronica deals with issues such as slavery, the short-sightedness of her grandfather, a lack of commitment and ambition. She is a dreamer and has the conviction to stand up to her grandfather who belongs to a bygone era when it was enough to trust and do what was expected of one. Even though the landscape in the set is portrayed as peaceful and isolated, it conveys a feeling of desolation which is possibly a reflection of Buks's soul. A set may, however, be regarded as merely a physical attribute; a point of reference and not a specific place. According to Sutcliffe:

Locations in stage productions are always imaginary, always just themselves – a stage set – in mundane physical fact. The nature of the contract is that audiences can be in many places with many thoughts at one and the same time. (1996:222)

The librettist, Guy Willoughby, was inspired by Fugard's play when he reviewed it in 1995. He decided that since it is a story about music dealing with contemporary, archetypal and universal issues, it would make good opera material. The texts of the nine songs in the original were retained without the original music: 'Railway Bus'; 'My Oupa was a soldier'; Parody on 'La donna é mobile'; 'Wake up and dream'; 'Die Heiland is gebore'; 'The old Hundredth' (instead of 'Ek sal die Here Loof'); 'The wind is blowing'; 'You plant seeds and I sing songs' and 'You're breaking my heart, Valley that I love'. The two character roles were extended to eight singing roles and there are, at most, sixteen village people. The chorus was cleverly woven into scenes initially only related by the two characters, namely in the 'Post Office', 'Gossip', and 'Church' scenes.

Willoughby approached Thomas Rajna to compose the opera who then wrote a synopsis and breakdown of the scenes. This collaboration and input by the composer was vital to the creative process. Rajna states that 'after all the suitable bits were set to music, only the dialogue remained which consisted largely of political conversation'.⁸

The opera may be described as eclectic due to the many different styles present. This is deliberately done to create a spectrum of associations for the audience's benefit rather than to portray the diversity of South African culture. The librettist believes that for this very reason the opera is accessible to a non-traditional opera audience, which Rajna feels is necessary if such a work is to be a vehicle of self-expression. He explains his view as follows:

this is not a propaganda piece and there is no evidence of nationalism in the work. I am Hungarian, living and writing within a South African context and do not see any purpose in pursuing a national identity, musically, since we are all part of the global village.⁹

⁷ Personal communication in interviews with Steven Stead (4 March 2005) and Graham Scott, (12 March 2005).

⁸ Personal communication in an interview with Thomas Rajna, 21 October 2004.

⁹ Personal communication in an interview with Thomas Rajna, 21 October 2004.

The piece plays on the tensions inherent in social and political views which are not unique, but which are equally important to each individual character irrespective of racial group.

Rajna's visit to David Kramer's production 'Karoo Kitaar Blues' served as an inspiration and stylistic influence which filtered through to a few songs, allowing the composer to transform the rural four-bar tunes (short phrases) into longer ones of his own. One certainly does not pick up the 'Karoo' flavour in *Valley Song*. Rajna suggests that these Karoo-inspired melodies become 'leitmotivs' which add local colour to the work. He says that the intervals and short phrases were discarded but the harmonies and rhythms are vital to the work.¹⁰ The influence of the Western Cape Minstrel 'klopse' rhythm can be found in 'The Bicycle Song' that appears later in a different guise as Whiteman's 'Country House' at the end of Act I.

The composer likes to describe his musical idiom as 'Contemporary Lyricism' (Brommert 2000: 2). This description suits the character of some of the numbers, such as Veronica's 'I hate these Akkers'. The work is largely tonal while some pieces are atonal to depict confrontation or friction in the play, as, for example, in the Post Office scene.

Rajna uses recurring themes he terms 'leitmotivs', as a unifying factor in the work. The most obvious is a theme introduced by the flute in the Prelude that foreshadows the extrovert 'Bicycle Song' and Whiteman's songs; 'I have one dream left' and 'My country house'. The theme is also superimposed in the last four bars of the 'Old 100th' Hymn tune, 'All people that on earth do dwell'.

Rajna says that he is always conscious of traditional structures; the larger design as much as the individual form. He ends the opera as it began, with the flute music of the Prelude now sung by Veronica as she bids farewell ('You're breaking my heart, Valley that I love'). The Prelude initially suggests her purity, strength and tenderness. At the close, the poignant theme is extended to complete the action.

The opera developed from the composer's interpretation of the text. There are a few deliberate quotations from existing works, the most important being Schubert's 'Marche Militaire' - reaching Wagnerian proportions in the introduction of 'My Oupa was a soldier' - which is transformed to evoke the military background of Veronica's grandfather. Here is yet again an instance where the reference is completely absorbed into the texture while retaining a clear evocation of the existing text.

The very prominent statement of the 'Marche Militaire' in the introduction to the song is developed and later appears in various forms in the interludes linking the verses. It becomes an essential unifying motif. It would appear that Stravinsky's use of the same motif in his 'Circus Polka' might have influenced Rajna to use this reference. He also admits that he is also strongly influenced by Bartók's work.

The parody suggested by Fugard is taken seriously, and momentarily the thought 'wrong opera' crosses our mind when we hear snippets of Verdi's 'La donna é mobile' as 'Lay donder mobiley'

¹⁰ Personal communication in an interview with Thomas Rajna, 21 October 2004.

which is an almost exact quotation of the original. Rajna calls this spoof a humorous dramatic device to poke some fun at Oupa and his connection with Italian opera during the war. The theme first appears (four beats to the bar and not three as in the original) in a distorted form as Buks tries to remember the tune.

Fragments of *Die Stem*, the previous National Anthem of South Africa, are also used to caricature the 'verkrampste' Brigadier de Wet. The theme is absorbed into the orchestral texture and reappears several times with altered harmonies, while later there is a brief reference to Rimsky Korsakof's 'Flight of the bumble bee' to depict the ill-natured brigadier – a cardboard figure as it were, propped up by musical quotations. Of the many dramatic scenes, none are as exciting and hilarious as the 'Post Office' scene, the dramatic interaction between Mrs Oliphant and the Brigadier being a director's delight.

The settings of established Hymn tunes – 'Die Heiland is gebore' and 'All People that on earth do dwell' - contain Rajna's own harmonisations. The use of these hymn tunes (which also occur in the original play) reflects the cultural heritage of the missionaries, while the 'Bicycle Song' with its 'klopse' accompaniment beat reveals yet another cultural influence as does 'Nature Boy' with its Pop/TV cultural connotation.

When asked whether the work might be categorised as an opera, the director, Steven Stead said it was 'South African music theatre', while the conductor, Graham Scott, described it as being a 'music drama'.¹¹ There are structural problems – the dialogue is too weighty for it to be opera, the music too serious for it to be a musical even though it is structured like one. Parts of the libretto had to be cut since there was no sense in repeating what had already appeared in the songs. The work could be described as an opera if the music were the sole provider of emotional energy, but it is not so in this case. The composer is willing to accept the term 'music theatre' but cites Britten's *Beggar's Opera* where pages of dialogue seem to be acceptable. What Rajna has not questioned is whether this work (often referred to as ballad opera) is indeed an opera as has been defined in this dissertation.

The amount of recitative is limited and word stresses were often misplaced, resulting in difficulties for the singers. It is awkward for an audience to follow recitative when the setting of the text does not follow a language's natural inflections of speech. There has to be a reason for turning words into song, either as an extension of or to highlight a portion of the text, and then only if the text demands it - a practice that is not always followed in *Valley Song*.

Apart from poetry where the sound and phrasing of words has a musical quality, music overrides the cerebral with its ability to express what words cannot, and therefore adds a deeper meaning or added expressiveness. For this reason the opera appeals to the emotional faculties far more than the play does. In *Valley Song*, theatre and music are equal partners in their presentation.

Even though directors might feel that this work has its share of demerits, one could nevertheless argue that as a whole it is effective: Rajna's orchestration is successful and enhances the vocal element to good effect. In addition the composer is planning not only to make a few minor corrections to the score as far as balance and dynamics are concerned, but the swing percussion

¹¹ Personal communication with directors, 4 March and 12 March 2005.

rhythm will also be altered to make it sound less academic.¹² Even though the composer and librettist feel that a sufficient improvement will have been accomplished, I am nevertheless of the opinion that this opera needs additional reworking. For example, I felt that the 'Food song' disrupts the atmosphere created by the preceding dramatic moment.

Both Rajna and Willoughby, however, agree that they need to reposition some of the scenes and to possibly include Whiteman to offer some distraction in the rather drawn-out opening 'Oupa-Veronica' scenes. Certain changes were effected in rehearsal, and the work, initially conceived as a continuous whole, has become a lengthy 'two-acter'. Irish (2005:11) supports this opinion by saying: 'I hope that this production will serve as opportunity to edit and refine an endeavour which has, as yet, still to make it across the divide between play and opera.'

Classification

Valley Song may be classified as a South African work because it is based on a South African play written by Athol Fugard, set in the Karoo town of New Bethesda and composed by Hungarian-born Thomas Rajna who is resident in South Africa.

Categorisation.

Valley Song can realistically be classified as 'musical theatre' since the music does not drive the drama and the dialogue is too weighty for opera.

The following reviews may be found in Appendix B:

Amarantha

Allison, J. 2002. Rajna. *BBC Music Magazine*. 11(3): 94.

Brommert, B. 2000. Rajna's opera finally ready after 40 years, *The Cape Argus*: 2, November 17.

Fourie, C. 2000. New opera off to an uneven and inaudible start, *The Cape Argus*: 2, November 28.

Irish, D. 2000. Gripping opera has its première, *The Cape Times*: 10, November 29.

Kooij, P. 2000. Mooi musiek, maar opera kry gemengde ontvangs, *Die Burger*: 11, November 27.

Rajna, T. 1992. *Amarantha* (manuscript): II-IV.

Smith, B. 2001. South Africa deep south transfer, *Opera*. 48: 358-360.

Willoughby, G. 2000. A crazy obsession, *Mail & Guardian*: 3, December 1-7.

¹² Personal communication with Thomas Rajna, April 2005.

Valley Song

- Chisholm, F. 2005. Valley Song does Fugard proud, *The Cape Times*: 15, March 14.
- Fourie, C. 2005. Rural opera easy on the ear, *The Cape Argus*: 5, March 9.
- Irish, D. 2005. Struggling between play and opera: intriguing show fails to reach potential, *The Cape Times*: 11, March 10.
- Jordan, M. 2005. Opera. *Business Day*: 11, March 9.
- Kooij, P. 2003. Voorsmaak van Rajna-opera hét belofte, *Die Burger*: 8, February 25.
- Maas, G. 2005. Nuanses, patos en humor van Fugard behou in opera, *Die Burger*: 12, March 5.
- Maas, G. 2005. Opera 'Valley Song' moet gesien word, *Die Burger*: 10, March 7.
- Odendaal, T. 2005. 'Valley Song' verdien aandag, *Beeld Plus*: March 10. (See appendix B: 19)

CHAPTER TWO: OPERAS BY ROELOF TEMMINGH

Enoch, Prophet of God

Composers Roelof Temmingh / Lungile Jacobs
Librettist Michael Williams
Conductor David John Scarr
Director Michael Williams

Première at the Nico Malan Theatre¹, Cape Town, January 1995

Characters	Voice type	First Performance Cast
Enoch	baritone	Abel Motsoadi
Moses	tenor	Marcus Desando
Zandile	soprano	Sibongile Mngoma
Charles	baritone	Fikile Mvinjelwa
John Nightingale	bass	John Eager
Mary Nightingale	mezzo soprano	Christina Farr
Tom Jenkins	tenor	Gordon Christie
Young Officer	spoken role	Blaise Koch
Jacob Jabavu	baritone	Ronald Theys
Praise Singer		Lungile Jacobs

Chorus: Residents of Queenstown, Israelites and Spirits.

Orchestration

2 Flutes
 2 Oboes
 2 Clarinets
 2 Bassoons
 4 Horns
 3 Trumpets
 2 Trombones, Bass Trombone
 Harp
 Timpani
 Percussion (x2)
 Strings

Synopsis²

ACT I

Scene 1: Desert

Moses, an orphan of the city streets, has heard Enoch's message and joins him in the desert. Moses believes Enoch will bring freedom to the people and promises to serve him until death. Zandile, the daughter of a wealthy landowner, Jacob Jabavu, has fallen in love with Moses.

¹ Nico Malan – Name was changed to Artscape in 1999.

² Condensed version of the synopsis found in the programme notes, by kind permission of Michael Williams.

Charles Mgiijima, Enoch's brother, looks on in awe of his brother's power over the people who have come to listen to him. Enoch preaches redemption to the people who change their ways and join his group of followers called the Israelites. They are stationed near Queenstown but want to live at Ntabelanga, the Mountain of the Sun.

Scene 2

After preaching a sermon, Moses asks Zandile to join the movement, but she is reluctant at first because her father has warned her about Enoch's teachings and about false prophets. The lovers quarrel but resolve their differences as Enoch encourages Zandile to leave her father to join the Israelites.

Scene 3: A Queenstown garden party

John Nightingale, the District Officer of Queenstown, invites guests to a garden party to celebrate Empire Day. His wife, Mary, enjoys making polite conversation that ranges from the weather to the problem of 'the natives' gathering in the desert. Tom Jenkins, head of the local militia, urges John to act against the camp of Israelites. Jenkins plants the seeds of fear in the minds of the guests, and Mary tries to change the topic of conversation. However, John is unwilling to act.

Jacob Jabavu enters to announce that his daughter has been kidnapped by Enoch and his followers. He demands that John, as the district officer, return his daughter to him. The guests are enraged by the 'kidnapping' and Jenkins advises John to act with force. Mary warns John of making too hasty a decision.

ACT II

Scene 1: Ntabelanga

After celebrating the marriage of Moses to Zandile, Enoch interprets the people's dreams – he sees only blood and death. Enoch disagrees with Moses who wants him to lead the people in revolt against the government; but instead he prays for spiritual redemption. Charles intervenes in the argument, pleading for peace, but Enoch says that there will only be war and death in this country. He also sees the end of the world.

A group of soldiers approaches the Israelite town, demanding the release of Zandile, but she tells the young officer and her father of her voluntary decision to marry Moses and to join the Israelites. Jacob Jabavu pleads with his daughter but she is committed to her husband. The Israelites advance on the soldiers who have tried to fire at them without success because their bullets 'turn to water'. The officer and his men exit, leaving supplies and ammunition behind. Enoch chastises Moses for declaring the event a victory over the soldiers and tells him to return the weapons and supplies. He claims that a miracle has taken place and leads the people in prayer.

Scene 2: The study of John Nightingale

Tom is infuriated by the incident and demands that John act immediately. He is concerned about the growing unhappiness of the journalists and the white community and, unlike Mary, sees only a military solution. John hands him the letter from the Prime Minister, Jan Smuts, ordering the

government troops to attack the Israelites. While Tom reads the report, John has a moment of introspection in which he imagines a conversation and argument with the prophet. Mary enters and makes her own observations while Zandile questions Enoch's motives. The residents of Queenstown and the Israelites await the tragedy that will change their lives forever. The situation is interrupted by Tom who is eager to put the plan into action. Moses enters and reports that a convoy of armed forces is headed towards Ntabelanga. He, too, is eagerly awaiting the impending conflict. The conflicting groups form as the residents demand justice and the Israelites independence.

Scene 3: The desert

Tom and Moses insult each other as the Shades, representing the ancestors, prepare for the blood that will flow. Zandile warns Moses of the danger he faces and John observes the battle preparations in disgust, knowing that a massacre will ensue.

The Israelite's men are no match for the government machine guns. Enoch walks among the dead men in a state of shock while Zandile cradles Moses' corpse. Meanwhile the Israelite women search for their loved ones. They call for peace and implore the men to dream their dream. The women bring back their fallen, and the residents of Queenstown join them to become a nation united by tragedy. The company calls for the day when God will bring peace on earth. Enoch appears and his final prophesy is that this event will never be forgotten.

Discussion of *Enoch, Prophet of God*

Michael Williams' initial inspiration for this opera is based on the Bulhoek massacre of 1921 which he read about in Robert Edgar's book 'Because they chose the plan of God' (the title taken from a part of the inscription on the tombstone of a mass grave of the Israelites which then continues with the words 'so the world did not have a place for them').³ Williams felt that the Prophet's struggle with the authorities and his own conscience could be expressed in an opera as follows:

Enoch's sermon – an aria
 Israelites' reactions – chorus
 Battle scene – full orchestra
 Passover ceremony – Xhosa songs

Another inspirational source was David Philips' publication of *This Day and Age*, a novel by Mike Nicol. This led to the inclusion of a Bible chained to Enoch's wrist, the sentiments expressed in Enoch's opening aria and some of the imagery in Zandile's two arias.⁴ Temmingh admits that he is not an opera-lover but familiarized himself with the genre as seen in works by Bartók, Britten, Berg, Stockhausen and Schnittke in preparation for the task at hand.⁵

³ On Empire Day, which was also Jan Smut's birthday, 380 Israelites were killed, one policeman suffered a shoulder wound and 150 men were imprisoned. Enoch and his brother, Charles, were arrested and sentenced to six years' hard labour. Charles died in prison and Enoch, after his release in 1924, died on 5 March 1928. The Israelite church still flourishes in the Queenstown area as well as other parts of the Eastern Cape.

⁴ Other literary sources have come from Israelite hymns, Francis Carey Slater's poem, *Drought* and a fragment from a Langston Hughes poem. Michael Williams: Programme Notes. (See appendix C: 2)

This provided him with a thorough basis from which to work, and once inspired by Williams' text, there was no looking back.

All Temmingh's operas and works since *Enoch, Prophet of God* have been written in a neo-tonal idiom, using the octotonic scale – a succession of whole and half tones e.g. C – D – Eb - F - F# - G# - A – B. Three versions are possible, and by means of modulation, one can slip from one version of the mode to the next. Shostakovich also employed these modes, and it comes as no surprise that there is often a resemblance to his works.

Temmingh likes to think of his new tonality as *untonal* and not *atonal* in flavour. He believes in minimal complexity and is concerned about the music becoming too intricate, and not reaching the listener. According to Temmingh, 'modern composers in South Africa write too many notes' and often inflict unnecessary difficulties on the performers. His textures, on the other hand, are often transparent with ostinato patterns accompanying a melodic line.⁶

The composer himself comments that there is a slight hint of African rhythm and repetitive ostinato patterns in *Enoch*, but that on the whole, he has no inclination to fuse these elements with his new tonality. Hence, the insertion of Lungile Jacobs' choral work above a sustained 'G' which is held by the orchestra. The interpolation of traditional Xhosa choral singing is a first for opera in this country. During rehearsals, at the composer's suggestion, the players began to improvise above the given pedal-point to fit in with the choral work and ululation on stage. The only problem seemed to be of a dramatic nature, the work proving to be too long. Eichbaum (1995:71) reports:

Anyone expecting a brilliant fusion between African and Eurocentric musical styles was bound to be disappointed. Despite the insertion of some highly effective passages of Xhosa choral music, conceived by Lungile Jacobs, *Enoch* is essentially a work conceived within the ambit of Western musical traditions.

The Battle-scene music begins with similarities to Shostakovich's Eleventh Symphony containing the 'first upheaval against the tsar' theme. According to Temmingh, critics seemed to accept this parallel but objected to his use of the same formal structure.⁷

Contrary to the initial draft where the dead are left in the field, the script (adapted to allow the audience to leave on a positive note), makes provision for the dead to rise. Temmingh, claiming that there is no reason for upliftment, pre-empted the ending of *Sacred Bones* and *Buchuland* by writing a musical anti-climax.

Critics also observed a reference to Britten's *Peter Grimes*, especially when the prophet is not only called by name, but the intervals used are also similar. Eichbaum (1995:71) goes on to say:

There is nothing startlingly original about the score, either, which is stylistically reminiscent of the earlier operas of Benjamin Britten, both in terms of orchestration and the *Sprechgesang* style of vocal delivery. This influence is particularly marked in the scene in which the white populace of Queenstown vents its anger against Enoch and his Israelite movement in a manner and style which is very similar to an identical

⁵ Personal communication in an interview with Roelof Temmingh, 10 December 2004.

⁶ Personal communication in an interview with Roelof Temmingh, 10 December 2004.

⁷ Personal communication in an interview with Roelof Temmingh, 1 April 2005.

dramatic scene in Britten's *Peter Grimes* – the chorus calling Enoch's name repeatedly in the same manner as the fishing village folk repeatedly call for Grimes to make an appearance to answer charges against him.

I agree with Eichbaum that the tedious monologue delivered by the prophet in Act I needs pruning. The reason for its monotony becomes clear when one takes into consideration that the composer left the text intact, his only addition to it being 'Ha-ha-ha-ha.'

There is evidence of action when the settlers appear in Act 2. Elspeth Jack (1995:9) remarks:

Mrs Nightingale's garden party in Queenstown provided a welcome moment of light relief in an otherwise heavily dramatic and highly charged story.

The garden party scene is effective, especially when the settlers 'freeze' and John Nightingale contemplates the manoeuvres of the Israelites. There are pounding rhythms that help to express the fear of the white settlers and anticipate events that are to follow. These violent rhythms, also present in the Battle-scene, introduce contrast to Temmingh's jagged vocal declamatory style before the monologue resumes once more. The sub-plot that develops (Moses and Zandile's relationship) adds romantic interest to the politically very charged story.

Enoch, Prophet of God is one of the first truly South African operas. It combines the art of storytelling and music, two elements that are essential in African daily life.⁸ The opera affords black singers the opportunity of singing principal roles as well as being part of an operatic chorus in a historical, political work that makes ideological statements. Political statements are not foreign to opera and, in order for South African opera to succeed, it needs to make them.

Classification

Enoch, Prophet of God is important as a South African work, firstly because it is the first opera based on an historical event, and secondly because it recognises and promotes both the political and spiritual aspects of culture.

Categorisation

Its distinctive 20th-century style also makes the work an important contribution to opera as a genre.

⁸ Refer to Julius Eichbaum quotation in the Introduction, page 2.

SACRED BONES

Composer **Roelof Temmingh**
Librettist **Michael Williams**
Conductor **David Tidboald**
Director **Fred Abrahamse**

Premièred at the Nico Malan Theatre, Cape Town, June 1997

Characters	Voice type	First Performance Cast
Bessie Lutter , farmer's widow	soprano	Marita Napier
Professor John Plomer , the client	tenor	Gordon Christie
Kathleen Plomer , his wife	mezzo soprano	Isabelle van Zyl
Robin Hurt , the hunter	baritone	John Eager
Naru , his slave	bass	Fikile Mvinjelwa

Male Chorus: Bearers, poachers, bandits and shadows of the bushes

Tenors	Siyabulela Bede, Marcus Desando
Baritones	Fundile Nkosi, Phumelele Ntsebeso
Basses	Xolela Sixaba, Zwelilungile Sidloyi

Orchestration

Flute/Piccolo
 Oboe/Cor Anglais
 Clarinet
 Bassoon/Contra Bassoon
 Horn
 Percussion
 Strings

Synopsis⁹

Peter Klatzow (1997:14) writes that 'It is a musical thriller with overtones of *Murder, she wrote* set deep in the African bush on border country'.

The Plomer expedition sets off on an archaeological excavation in the African bush. The aim of the expedition is to establish a connection between violent behaviour in modern man and that of our primitive ancestors. Professor Plomer takes along his wife, Kathleen, who is on her own mission of self-discovery and curious to find out whether their relationship has meaning.

It is the responsibility of the hunter, Robin, and his tracker/slave, Naru, to bring the party safely to Bessie Lutter's farm in the border country. Naru is averse to leading the party since he has to take his late father's place as the *shaman* of his village, but he is committed to Robin for having saved him from the jaws of a lion.

⁹ Condensed version of synopsis found in programme notes, by kind permission of Michael Williams.

Bessie Lutter, just recovered from being raped and losing her husband at the cruel hand of mercenaries, anxiously awaits the arrival of her lover, Robin Hurt.

As they near their destination, there is an unexpected turn of events. While the professor is absorbed in his palaeontology, Robin and Kathleen are attracted to each other. On arrival at the Nieuwoudt farm, it is Bessie who triggers the tragic course of events, resulting in everyone having a motive for the murder of Professor Plomer!

Discussion of *Sacred Bones*

A small chorus and chamber orchestra complement and support the characters in this one-act Safari fantasy where feelings of jealousy, greed, power, passion, love and betrayal all play a part. Barry Smith (1997:1356) observes:

The danger of such a storyline is that it has all the pitfalls of the obvious: the African bush is seen as cruel, the white settlers as interlopers, and the Africans themselves unsure whether they are part of the old or new way of life.

The libretto is much more poetic and lyrical than that of *Enoch, Prophet of God*. This allows Temmingh to display his natural flair for setting words to music and his ability to write long sustained phrases. His operatic style of writing is firmly established, and one can hear certain defining features emerge, for example, the percussive gun-shots also present in *Enoch*; the descending motives and the low, fading ending. Fourie (1997:3) notes that, again, 'Temmingh's score tends to dissipate in the closing bars of the work, rather than flesh out the truth of the drama'.



A scene from the chamber opera, *Sacred Bones*.

Social, philosophical and psychological comment is part of the intrigue, since the ensemble scene presents each character with the opportunity to come forward with a motive for the murder. In the end, the expedition has torn them apart and indeed proved to be a journey of self-discovery.

Political comment is addressed in Bessie Lutter's fear of those who murdered her husband, raped her, and now want to take ownership of her land. Her fear represents the collective emotion of the whites in South Africa who feel threatened by the unknown, and the possibility of black domination. This theme, while dating the work as belonging to a pre-democratic era still remains uncomfortably relevant.

Classification

Sacred Bones may be classified as a South African work because it is set in the African bush and written by a South African librettist and Dutch composer resident in South Africa. Temmingh writes in a minimalistic fashion and makes extensive use of the percussion section to conjure up the ethnic element in his score.

Categorisation

Even though *Sacred Bones* is a chamber opera that has merit, the following criticisms are levelled at it to deny it total success:

- The brevity of the opera does not allow themes to develop and confusion arises due to the compression of dramatic material. Fourie observes:

Because of the work's chamber construction, the fleeting reference to, and stage presence of the poachers, did not contribute much to the drama of the looming danger encircling the party, either. The opera climaxes with a murder. The choice of victim is strange, resulting in an almost unnatural truncation of events. (1997:3)

Irish confirms the above in his review:

This is an awful lot of material to compress into less than 90 minutes and inevitably there is a good deal of confusion, which is exacerbated by the use of the same six chorus members as bearers, poachers and mercenaries. (1997: C7)¹⁰

- The romantic theme in the plot is not developed, and the score finds no place for it either. The lovers part and we are left unsure as to who did, in fact, murder Professor Plomer.
- Temmingh's style does not allow for 'pretty melodies' and comes close only in two arias, namely, 'I could smell him then' and 'When someone you love dies'. (Klatzow 1997:14)
- It is the perfect ninety-minute 'whodunnit', yet Williams feels that the audience is let down towards the end of the opera because at the 'eleventh hour', as he calls it, they

¹⁰ See appendix C: 7.

failed to create a magical moment.¹¹ He maintains that what happens in the last fifteen to twenty minutes of an opera determines its success or failure. At this point the plot needs to unfold and there should be some kind of climax. This is not the case in *Sacred Bones*, but Williams fails to recognise that he is basing his assumptions on 19th century models that are not reflected by Temmingh's stylistic characteristics.

¹¹ Personal communication in an interview with Michael Williams, 6 April 2005.

BUCHULAND

Composer **Roelof Temmingh**
Librettist **Michael Williams**
Conductor **David Scarr**
Director **Michael Williams**

Première at the State Theatre, Pretoria, July 1998

Characters	Voice type	First Performance Cast
Katrina Bantjies	soprano	Virginia Davids
Titus April	tenor	Curtis Rayam
Ben Basson	bass	Rouel Beukes
Cornelius van der Merwe	bass	Eric Visser
Andries Venter	tenor	Jannie Moolman/Alec Otto
Ma Bantjies	mezzo soprano	Sibongile Khumalo
Sappie Dirks	baritone	Ronald Theys
Simple Jan	tenor	Alec Otto
Arrie	bass	Kaiser Nkosi
Dawid	bass	Patrick Shabalala
Solomon	tenor	Johan de Bruin
Samuel	tenor	Sidwell Mhlongo
Daniel	bass	Francois Möller
Sampie	tenor	Stéfan Louw
Marilyn Dirks	soprano	Loveline Madumo
Lewiesa Dirks	alto	Fefe Ngcuka
Johnnie Fortuin	baritone	Fikile Mvinjelwa

Orchestration

2 Flutes
 2 Oboes
 2 Clarinets
 2 Bassoons
 4 Horns
 3 Trumpets
 2 Trombones, Bass Trombone
 Harp
 Timpani
 2 Percussion
 Strings

Synopsis¹²

ACT I

It is 1959 and Titus April and Katrina Bantjies are lost in the mountainous Kolkat (Leopard) country. They are soon rescued, but during their crisis they at some stage surround themselves

¹² Condensed version of synopsis found in programme notes, by kind permission of Michael Williams

with a ring of fire and swear to be true to each other forever. Six weeks later, Titus and six other men are accused of stealing four sheep from Cornelius van der Merwe, but due to lack of evidence, Ben Basson, the magistrate, cannot convict them. Andries Venter, the dominee of the mission station, vouches for the men and the magistrate is forced to drop the charges. Basson warns them of the harsh changes being introduced throughout the country. Meanwhile Andries Venter questions his faith and position as dominee at the mission station since he is tormented by a recent decision taken by the church committee that will affect the community.

Interlude 1: Drought. Dawn reveals a land suffering from drought. A pale, golden sun rises and begins to generate a searing heat.

Andries leads the Buchulanders in an early-morning prayer to end the drought. After prayers, Ma Bantjies reminds the women of the Landbouskou (Agricultural show) meeting; the children are called to school; six men are punished for drinking at the mission and the rest prepare for work. Sappie Dirks, a pig farmer, and Titus try to ingratiate themselves with Ma Bantjies and Katrina, but the women are not interested. Later Titus manages to tell Katrina of his intention to work for Sanderson, a local farmer who has offered him an acre of land for every year in his employ. Titus proposes, but Katrina wants to be more than a farmgirl. She has had enough of the hardship and poverty of country life. They are interrupted by Ma and Sappie who are at loggerheads because Sappie wants Ma to leave with him. She reminds him that Queen Victoria gave the Buchulanders the land many years ago. They sing about the *Promise of the Land*.

ACT II

One Sunday morning Johnnie Fortuin, a travelling salesman, waits outside the church to sell his wares to the Buchulanders. After the service, the people stream into the square to buy goods at the Landbouskou. Katrina is immediately attracted to this dashing young man. Dominee Venter is about to send Johnnie packing, when he is reminded that the mission is no longer his. Ma Bantjies questions Fortuin about the rumour that the Dutch Reformed Church is proposing to sell Buchuland and that the mission station is to be closed. Titus is more concerned about Johnnie's wandering eye and Katrina's ambition.

The next evening, the Mission square comes alive with festivities celebrating the first night of the Landbouskou. Johnnie scoffs at the old song and, with Katrina in his arms, teaches them a city tune. Titus attacks Johnnie but their fight is interrupted by Dominee Venter who brings sad news. Ben Basson announces that the land has been sold to Cornelius van der Merwe, who serves the people with an eviction notice.

Interlude 2: Resistance. Resistance and defiance in the face of adversity.

The community cannot accept this betrayal and march to the city, demanding justice. Titus and Katrina do not join the march despite the pleas of Ma Bantjies and Sappie. Titus again asks Katrina to marry him, but Katrina refuses. Titus seduces her in an attempt to make her stay but knows she will leave him to go to the city.

The people's march to the city has failed, the Buchlanders' homes are burnt down and their livestock poisoned.

They are forced to leave the land and Katrina vows never to return to Buchuland. She forgets her promise to Titus and plans to start a new life with Johnnie Fortuin. That night the rain finally falls, the drought is broken but the rain has come too late!

ACT III

Thirty-five years later, in 1994, the Buchlanders queue with the rest of South Africa to vote for a new government. The people sing of their hopes and fears for the future. Katrina now lives and works in the city as a hostess and torch singer for Johnnie's nightclub, *Katie's Joint*. Johnnie plans to close the club and tells Katrina to find another job. She reads in the newspaper of the Buchlanders' application to the Land Claims Court. She pulls out a box of letters, faithfully written to her by Titus over the last thirty-five years. She recalls their love affair and thinks of how empty her life has turned out to be.

Titus, now a wealthy farmer and landowner, is visited by Andries Venter who has long since given up the ministry. Titus orders him off his land, but Andries insists on inviting him to attend a meeting to discuss the Land Claims application. The Buchlanders argue noisily at the meeting while Andries attempts to talk to them. Katrina sits alone in the back row and is the first to see Titus enter. Titus questions her about their promise while the people question Andries about theirs. Finally both sides agree to talk. Titus shows Katrina his land and explains that it was all brought about for her sake. She responds that she has nothing to offer in return - no beauty, no youth, no fortune. He reminds her of their promise and his love for her.

Interlude 3: Reconciliation. The wish of a people to forget a hateful past and look towards a future of prosperity and peace.

Joyously, the people return to Buchuland for good. Andries, Katrina and Titus lead the people back to their promised land. Andries is asked to pray for the land, and after Titus persuades him, he blesses Titus and Katrina's union, Buchuland and South Africa.

Discussion of *Buchuland*

Buchuland, Williams' tenth and Temmingh's favourite and best opera, is about love lost and eventually rekindled, as well as forced removals from land and its reclamation. The title, taken from the herb *boegoe*, a plant used for healing purposes, possibly hints at the peace process in South Africa and the effect that this has on the rest of the world.

The work was commissioned by the UNISA Music Foundation and the State Theatre for the twenty-third World Conference of the International Society of Music Educators (ISME) at the State Theatre. They requested 'something South African, that the people can identify with and expresses the spirit of reconciliation'.¹³ Ironically, the State Theatre closed its doors after this

¹³ Taken from programme notes: The State Theatre. 1998. *Buchuland*. Michael Williams.

very production in 1998. The topic is universal in that it deals with issues that are basic to man, land and love. Since the plot is based on actual historical events and characters, it makes for good theatre. The music, though not 'accessible', is transparent and melodic.

The large structure works well, conceived from a script that allows for a whole gamut of emotions ranging from humour and anger to prayer and forgiveness. As a result we are left with the most magnificent opera music that Temmingh has ever written. Again, there are stylistic references that hark back to the previous operas, but the inclusion of scenes for children with Afrikaans songs taken from the FAK song book¹⁴ (one of them being 'As ek moeg word vir die lewe in die stad') and a hymn ('As hy weer kom') are noteworthy additions.

The composer has written interludes that link acts; and even though he considers it 'a lazy method of writing', uses the menacing *Kolkat*¹⁵ theme as a leitmotiv.¹⁶ The use of Afrikaans makes the opera more relevant because it is the language of the folk who were evicted from their land.

The first act opens with the lovers surrounded by a ring of fire (to protect them from the leopards). They sing a love duet - a feature not found in the previous two operas. There are many effective dramatic moments in the work, including the burning down of the people's houses and crops, the profundity of the dominee's prayer and the scene with the magistrate, to name but a few. Here again, the collaboration between composer and librettist produces both humour and melodrama.

The jazzy saxophone solo as well as the song that Katrina Bantjies sings in the nightclub (supervised improvisation), works well in context. Temmingh has managed to weave these strands into his style without losing the overall flavour. The textures in the vocal writing and orchestration remain transparent throughout. The work is in two parts with a great deal of octave-doubling and unison-writing. The orchestration works in blocks, as it does in most of Temmingh's work, and appears to be mathematically conceived, indicating the profound influence of Hindemith and possibly Stravinsky. Temmingh acknowledges references to the work of Menotti and Britten as well.¹⁷ The use of the octotonic scale, without the usual dominants and leading notes, poses a whole new challenge for the singer, but once mastered, opens up a new way of expression. An example is to be seen in the dominee's aria in Act I during which he loses faith and questions God's purpose for his life.

¹⁴ FAK: Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuur Vereniging.

¹⁵ Kolkat refers to the leopard that guards the hills around the mission station. Personal communication in an interview with Michael Williams, 6 April 2005.

¹⁶ Personal communication in an interview with Roelof Temmingh, 1 April 2005.

¹⁷ Personal communication in an interview with Michael Williams, 6 April 2005.

Classification

Buchuland may be regarded as a South African work since it deals with the 're-possession of land' issue as well as the peace process in South Africa. The composer has included Afrikaans children's songs and a popular children's hymn to give it a distinctly local flavour.

Categorisation

This work is a large-scale opera, a dramatic piece in which the music propels the drama forward.

The following reviews and programme notes may be found in Appendix C:

Enoch, Prophet of God

A condensed, historic account of the Bulhoek massacre and the prophet who led the Israelites, Enoch Mgijima. In: CAPAB. 1995. *Enoch, Prophet of God*. Michael Williams. (programme notes)

CAPAB. 1995. *Enoch, Prophet of God*. Michael Williams. (programme notes)

Eichbaum, J. 1995. 'Enoch, Prophet of God', *Opera Now*: 46(1): 71.

Jack, E. 1995. Little light relief in powerful and dramatic story, *The Cape Times*: 9, January 26.

Sacred Bones

Chisholm, F. 1997. Madama Napier in the bush, *The Cape Times*: 13, June 11.

Fourie, C. 1997. Congratulations are in order here, *The Cape Argus*: 3, June 17.

Irish, D. 1997. Visually, musically appealing 'Sacred' is often confusing, *The Cape Times*: July 15. (See appendix C: 7)

Klatzow, P. 1997. A splendid contribution to SA opera: 'Sacred Bones', *Scenaria*. 211: 13 – 14.

Louw, A. 1997. Accessible safari opera, *Daily Despatch*: 7, July 15.

Smith, B. 1997. South Africa white mischief, *Opera*. 48: 1356.

Wikner, B. 1997. An opera with a surprise, *Cue*: 9, July 10.

Buchuland

Boekkooi, P. 1998. 'Buchuland' 'n SA opera van helende hoop, *Rapport*: 14, May 3.

Eichbaum, J. 1998. The world première of 'Buchuland', *Scenaria*. 211: 13–14.

Gumede, S. 1998. SA opera makes deep impression, *Sowetan*: 16, July 28.

The State Theatre. 1998. *Buchuland*. Michael Williams. (programme notes)

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CHAPTER THREE : ORIGINAL WORKS ON AN AFRICAN THEME

Love & Green Onions

A jazz opera in Two Acts
Based on Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*

Composer	Denzil Weale
Book and Lyrics	Michael Williams
Orchestration	Peter McLea
Conductor	Graham Scott
Director	Michael Williams

Première at the Monument Theatre, Grahamstown on 28 June 2001

Followed by 8 performances at the Baxter Theatre in July 2001

Characters	Voice type	First Performance Cast
Noria (mother)	jazz singer	Gloria Bosman
Toloki (professional mourner)	baritone	Fikile Mvinjelwa
Bhut'shaddy (taxi-driver)	tenor	Marcus Desando

Community Roles played by members of Cape Town Opera Vocal Ensemble

Orchestration

Flute, Piccolo, Pennywhistle, Recorder (one player)
Alto Saxophone, Tenor saxophone, Clarinet, Pennywhistle (one player)
Trumpet, Trombone
Guitar (acoustic & electric), Banjo (one player)
Electric & Upright Bass Guitar
Piano, Synthesizer
Percussion: Drumset, Mallet, Timpani, miscellaneous

Synopsis¹

Act I: Noria is burying her son, Vutha, when she meets Toloki, an onion-eating professional mourner. They share happy childhood memories, having grown up in the same village. Noria remembers singing to Toloki's father, Jwara, but this is not a pleasant memory for him. Bhut'shaddy, a taxi driver and Noria's fiancé begins the narration of Vutha's death, revealing that there are lessons to be learnt from misfortune. Toloki helps Noria and Bhut'shaddy to rebuild Noria's burnt-down shack.

Act II: Bhut'shaddy makes advances and even proposes to Noria, but she is not interested. Toloki explains how his career choice came about.

¹ Condensed version of programme notes, by kind permission of Michael Williams.

After enduring deceit at a political meeting, Noria is ready to divulge the happenings of the night her son was killed. What happened was that after a vigilante group caught Vutha accepting sweets from neighbouring hostel dwellers, they coerced other children to hang a tyre around Vutha's neck, fill it with petrol and set it alight. Noria is now determined to revenge her son's death.

They undergo a cleansing ritual and Noria invites Toloki to live with her and to forget about being a professional mourner.

Discussion of *Love & Green Onions*

Zanemvula Kizito Gatyeni Mda, better known overseas as Zakes, is a noted South African novelist whose award-winning work *Ways of Dying* has been staged and dramatized by Lara Foot Newton. The magical realism of the piece inspired Michael Williams and Denzil Weale to give it an unusual treatment as jazz opera instead of the traditional opera setting. Thebe Mabanga (2001:6) quotes Williams as saying:

Ways of Dying is a magical, wonderful, surreal look at South African life – I was struck by the intensity with which Mda created a world that is not accessible. The way Mda transforms a bleak world also impressed me. I chose jazz because the book sings. I feel jazz is the best vehicle to carry the emotion.



Gloria Bosman in a scene from *Love & Green Onions*.

The Afro-American medium of Jazz is indeed an appropriate one. The jazz standards sung by Noria are effective and an extremely expressive means of conveying emotions. Noria's 'Abide with me' at the start, is a case in point; as this song communicates the emotion of the mother-in-mourning, and has been arranged successfully in the new idiom.

A jazz opera might be problematic for South African audiences, but if one considers the existence of ragtime opera and other folk opera genres that aspired to 'elevate ragtime to high art' (e.g., Joplin's *Treemonisha*), then the idea is not as original as it appears. Wilfred Mellers et al in Grove Music Online further states:

the only full-scale opera to fuse black blues successfully with sophisticated stagecraft and an orchestral expertise more akin to that of Puccini or Ravel was *Porgy and Bess* (1935) - written by a white American Jew, George Gershwin...Bernstein's attempt to write a musical on a weightier dramatic subject resulted in his 1957 masterpiece *West Side Story*, described by Wadsworth as a 'jazz singspiel'... Bernstein combines angular jazz riffs with a Puccinian lyricism, achieving a surprisingly consistent overall style. (ed Macey:2006)

The same cannot be said of *Love & Green Onions*. It includes various styles such as jazz, gospel, opera, kwaito, kwela, marabi, as well as African choral singing and cabaret. The combination is too diverse, and all attempts at creating cohesion in the piece are hampered by having the male protagonist cast for a traditional operatic baritone while the female role is for a jazz singer. A possible solution might have been to have all character parts sung by jazz singers. Williams says that he was at the time experimenting with Kurt Weill's approach to music theatre, 'where one would have operatic moments as well as theatre moments in the same work'.³

Whether individual moments are experienced in jazz or operatic style, the work remains too episodic. It also demands tremendous versatility from the operatic vocal ensemble to apply a technique suited to a jazz style of performance, as opposed to the operatic and choral style to which they are accustomed. Fourie notes:

The chorus had a tough time with regards to the number of styles they had to master for this production. Vocally they did well, but the stylistically more operatic and traditional harmonic writings seemed out of step with the overall character of the work. (2001:D3)⁴

The piece tends to conform more to the 'musical' in format; most numbers, interspersed with dialogue, seeming to be incidental, and there is a general lack of dramatic development in the music as a whole. Fourie states:

It thoroughly blurs the styles of opera and musical, and could even serve as a trendsetter for future compositions. The work is an interesting experiment in musical styles. Dramatically it is powerful and relevant. (2001:D3)

The African choruses (traditional) are effective insertions as are the hymn-tunes with their traditional harmonisations. Kofi Agawu remarks:

There are many Africans today whose affective investment in 'What a friend we have in Jesus,' etc, is far greater, deeper and more sincere, than anything that might be awakened by a traditional funeral dirge or

³ Personal communication in an interview with Michael Williams, 6 April 2005.

⁴ See appendix D: 3

hunter's chant. The lineage of this investment begins, predictably with the introduction of hymns into worship as part of missionary proselytising in the 1840s. (2003:13)

It is therefore evident that European influences, due to colonisation and Christian missionaries, have already become part of African music.

Peter McLea orchestrated Weale's piano score for 12 players and many more instruments. Tone rows are used to identify characters. The alto saxophone is featured quite prominently, especially when Noria is on stage. The livelier pennywhistle portrays everyday scenes and follows Toloki, the professional mourner. Overall, it is the drumming whose prominence forms the basis of the sound together with the chorus.

One of the problems encountered in certain choruses by the chorus master was the difficulty of having to teach music that was written in as many parts as there were chorus members. This proved to be too challenging in the short period available for rehearsal and had to be adapted to meet the constraints imposed by the amount of time available.⁵ Other changes were made as well, and the re-working was then effected by Allan Stephenson and the conductor, Graham Scott.

The composer made effective use both of percussion and the cyclical element commonly found in African music. Veit Erlmann remarks on this repetitiveness as follows:

The repetitiveness of much African performance calibrates and stabilizes it; it fosters mediated involvement and community building. The cycles and recurring patterns of African music require and effectively promote composure rather than self-abandonment and ecstasy. (2000:86/87)

Nevertheless, there are certain scenes that are far too repetitious, the re-enactment of the necklacing scene for example, providing little contrast. There is no trace of thematic development, and even after re-arranging had been done, the repetition was retained, its function being to accommodate crucial narrative. The suspense regarding the boy's manner of death is delayed until the penultimate scene which, even though it fails musically, succeeds dramatically because Noria finds out that it is, in fact, her own neighbourhood that killed her son. This particular scene is quite disturbing since it is portrayed rather graphically.

Williams found that setting an existing work (*Zakes Mda's Ways of Dying*) was more of a challenge than writing his own material. The librettist is inhibited by the boundaries of the novel. Yet if one looks at many success stories in the musical and opera idiom, one discovers that most were based on existing novels or legends from the community.

This work fails as an example of South African opera in the democratic decade. The lack of integration of styles so dissimilar that they cannot co-exist in the same work destabilises it. I discovered that proportions within the work were not balanced, and it is evident that more time was needed to rewrite and arrange the music.

⁵ Personal communication in an interview with Allan Stephenson, May 2005.

Classification

Because *Love & Green Onions* is based on a local story set in a township by an African novelist it may be classified as South African. The musical style is eclectic, yet incorporates African styles in the harmonic and rhythmic language that contribute to its South African character.

Categorisation

Although the composer has called it a Jazz opera, in certain respects it really borders on being a hybrid variety because of its shared allegiance both to Italian-style opera and African associations. The lack of dramatic development, as stated earlier, and the episodic nature of the work renders it a typical example of music theatre.

PRINCESS MAGOGO

kaDINUZULU

Based on the life and songs of Princess Magogo

Composer	Mzilikazi Khumalo
Librettist	Themba Msimang
Orchestration, arrangements and additional music	Michael Hankinson
Conductor	Gerhard Geist
Director	Themi Venturas

Première at the Durban Playhouse in May 2002

Characters	Voice type	First Performance Cast
Princess Magogo	mezzo soprano	Sibongile Khumalo
King Dinuzulu	bass	Fikile Mvinjelwa
Mankulumana	tenor	Mhlonishwa Dlamini
Queen Silomo	lyric soprano	Linda Bukhosini
First Lady	lyric soprano	Joyce Moholoagae
Second Lady	mezzo soprano	Ntombintathu Mfeka
Third Lady	mezzo soprano	Nomthandazo Mkize
Bambatha	bass/baritone	Bongani Vilakazi
Duncan	tenor	William Silk
Praise Singer		Themba Msimang
Prince Solomon	tenor	Bongani Tembe
Ndwandwe	bass/baritone	Bongani Vilakazi
Inkosi Mathole	tenor	Siphiwe Blose

Mixed chorus of Warriors, Villagers, Abakwa Buthelezi and Elders - Durban Serenade Choral Society

Shembe Dancers

Siyanda Mabaso, Sandile Mazibuko, Mfanafuthi Mbokazi, Mlamuli Mzizi, Phathisakhe Ngcobo, Sibongiseni Nzama, Buyani Shangase, Bongani Tshabalala, Thabani Tshanini, Nhlakanipho Vezi, Thamsanqa Vazi, Xolani Zondo.

Zulu Dancers

Senzo Sokhele, Sfiso Ndlela, Sizwe Ntini, Zipho Mdletshe, Mduduzi Mpungose, S'fiso Mtshali, Te Nxumalo.

Drummer and Sangoma

Tiki Nxumalo

Children

Sanele Sosibo, Asanda Ngcobo, Ndumiso Ncube

Orchestration:

Flute/Piccolo
 Oboe/Cor Anglais
 Clarinet/Bass Clarinet
 Bassoon/Contra Bassoon
 2 Horns
 2 Trumpets
 2 Trombones
 2 Tubas
 Keyboard (sampling to obtain special tuned percussion such as Glockenspiel and Kalimba)
 Percussion instruments
 Strings (six 1st Violins, five 2nd Violins, four Violas, three Cellos, two Double Basses)

Synopsis⁶**PROLOGUE: Princess Magogo's bedroom – on her deathbed**

The opera opens with the Princess Magogo lying on her deathbed. She fondly remembers her youth ('Uyephi Na'). As she ends the song there is a dramatic change in the music. A chorus of male ancestral warriors enters, announcing the arrival of the ancestors ('Woza Sambe'). A Zulu King in full regalia and plumage appears out of the mist and stands next to her. He is her father, King Dinuzulu, who has come to collect her to join the ancestors ('Woza Mntanami', 'Woz'ekhaya'). Before she leaves to join them, she recalls important moments of her life.

ACT I**Scene 1: The Mahashini Royal Kraal – the King returns from exile**

All is not well in the Kingdom of the Zulus ('Umgwagwa Usehlomile'). King Dinuzulu returns from being imprisoned on the island of St Helena, and the Zulu nation is in disarray as a result of the war with the British. The chorus fills the stage in celebration of the King's return ('Shayani Ingungu maZulu'). He enters led in by an imbongi, a traditional praise-poet, who chants the king's praises ('Umamonga Usuthu'). The King greets the nation ('Ngiyanibingelela Zulu') and his people return the compliment by singing a song of celebration ('Kuhle Kwethu').

Scene 2: The Mahashini Royal Kraal (some time later) – the Queen's handmaidens announce the birth of the Princess.

At some stage into the celebrations a trio of the Queen's handmaidens enter and inform the King of the birth of the Princess, echoed by the Zulu songbird ('Ndabezitha, Nansi Indaba'). The King is overjoyed ('Zawuju Lezo 'Ndaba') and instructs the Phefeni regiment to dance with joy ('Giyani 'Zinsizwa zoSuthu').

⁶ Condensed version of synopsis by kind permission of Sandra de Villiers and Themba Msimang.

Scene 3: Queen Silomo's hut

The King hurries over to Queen Silomo's hut to express his joy ('Woza Ntandokazi') and together they celebrate the birth of the child by praising and thanking the ancestors ('Sibonga Ogogo').

Scene 4: Queen Silomo's hut (five years later) – Magogo's illness

As an infant, the young Princess Magogo contracts a mysterious illness. The Queen and her handmaidens appeal to the King and the ancestors for a remedy ('Iyagula Lengane'). The entire Zulu community is concerned about the illness of the Princess ('Inyanga Yegogo'). The Sangoma throws the bones to discover a cure. He then cures her by using the fat of the igogo buck. As a result, her brother Prince Mshiyeni nicknames her Magogo, the name that was to stay with her for the rest of her life.

Narrative Interlude 1: Singing for the nation

The dying Magogo from the prologue contemplates not only the name given to her by her brother, Prince Mshiyeni but also her many other nicknames, most of which relate to her musical talent and singing ability. She remembers with foreboding the dangers and tragedy that befell her family and ancestors at the hands of both the British and some of the more brutal Zulu Kings. She sings one of her own songs ('Sabulawa') about the sorry state of the Zulu nation at the hands of King Dingane, her anxiety born out of the scheming Bambatha who is agitating for a rebellion against the British.

Scene 5: The Mahashini Royal Kraal – Bambatha's rebellion

Bambatha leads the warriors in a song about rebellion ('Bambani im'khonto'). The King cautions them against the idea ('Walishisizwe Bambatha') even though he agrees with their sentiments. The warriors appeal to the King's sense of nationalism which leads him to appeal to the ancestors for guidance ('Koze Kube Nini'). Together they decry the machinations of the British Colonists ('Nangumlungu 'eshisizwe'). The King leads the warriors off the stage.

Scene 6: Somewhere in the Mahashini Royal Kraal

We encounter Queen Silomo singing with her daughter. In the duet she laments the influence that Bambatha's rebellion will have on their lives. The dying Magogo, witnessing her mother singing with her as a child, recollects the pain she felt as a little girl and joins her in the duet ('Wagenza Bambatha').

Scene 7: The Mahashini Royal Kraal – the arrest of the King

The rebel leader is captured and beheaded by the English. Duncan, the Commander of the British forces in Natal, enters and issues a warning to the Zulus ('Ikhandu LikaBambatha'). In the ensuing octet - comprising King Dinuzulu, Mankulumana, Queen Silomo, Duncan, the dying Magogo, the trio of Handmaidens and the chorus ('Wenzen'okandaba') - Duncan and the Zulus

argue about the position and relevance of the Zulu Royal House. The King is then arrested. As the King leaves, he charges his songbird, Princess Magogo, to sing about the history of her nation ('Manthithi Qophe Lomlando kaZulu'). Her charge is to bear witness to its destruction, and we experience the dying Magogo's pain as she recollects this moment with sadness.

ACT II

Scene 1: A rural church – solace in the church

Many years have passed. Meanwhile the Princess and her brothers have been orphaned. The act begins with Princess Magogo in church singing about the sheer weight of the responsibility that her father has given her as historian and storyteller ('Wangithwesitshekhand Dlothovu'). She finds solace in religion ('Ujehova Ungumlondoloz').

Scene 2: In the fields – the trials of the orphans and their vow

We see the young Princess and her brother, Prince Solomon, singing about their fate at the hands of their foster parents ('Nithule Nithini'), and the two then make a vow to look after each other. The Prince swears that he will elevate his sister to her correct station when he is crowned King. ('Ngiyakwethembisa Manthithi')

Scene 3: The stepmothers' kraal – Magogo is tormented

Magogo is tormented by her foster mothers who are jealous of her royal status and her ability to sing ('Umgogo Nondlukulu').

Scene 4: Solomon's Royal Kraal – King Solomon's coronation

The new King is crowned. He is proclaimed and venerated by the now ageing Mankulumana ('Nansi Inkosi Yenu'). King Solomon calls for unity among the Zulus and is at last able to elevate his sister to her rightful place in the royal household. They sing a duet in which he celebrates the appearance of the rainbow – symbolising the end of their hardship - and Magogo acknowledges his status as King ('Uthingo Iwenkosazana').

Scene 5: In a garden – the lovers meet

We hear the Princess perform one of her own compositions in which she extols the virtues of her lover ('Ngibambeni, ngibambeni') followed by our meeting Ndwandwe, the love of the Princess. They sing a duet about the joy of their burgeoning love ('Sofa Silahlane'). She then sings to her lover about whiling away the time until his return, accompanying herself on the ugubhu,⁷ a traditional bow percussion instrument ('Umghubansuku').

⁷ ugubhu: a single-stringed zulu bow.

Scene 6: King Solomon's Royal Kraal – the unification of the clans

Inkosi Mathole of the Buthelezi tribe gladly accepts the role to mediate between the Buthelezi and the Usuthu ('Ijadu'). They come together in a grand celebration where one group returns the compliments of the other. After the celebrations, the King, Inkosi Mathole and Mankulumana are left alone to finalise the agreements. It is during this settlement that Mankulumana suggests that Inkosi Buthelezi and the Princess should be married to further cement the unification of the two clans ('Sikhulekela Ubunye').

Scene 7: The garden once more – the farewell

We find the Princess lamenting the fact that she has to leave her love. She is joined by Ndwandwe. They sing a duet about the pain of their farewell ('Angivumanga, kuvume amathongo') and she sacrifices her great love for her nation.

EPILOGUE

Scene 1: Magogo's bedroom once more

We return to find Princess Magogo on her deathbed once more. She is surrounded by the male royal ancestors who commend her and call her home ('Woza Sambe'). As the male ancestors finish their song, they are joined by Inkosi Mathole who praises Magogo and invites her home. The Women of the Nation, represented by a trio of female ancestors, do likewise, as do Queen Silomo, King Dinuzulu, and King Solomon ('Woz'ekhaya'). They have come to carry her to join the ancestors ('Sengiyeza'). The heavens are revealed.

Scene 2: Stairway to heaven

Princess Magogo is ceremoniously dressed in ancestral garments and, as she ascends to heaven, the ancestors and the nation sing her praise in a grand finale ('Imbali yoMageba').

Discussion of Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu

The opera is to a large extent a reflection of historical events: Constance Magogo kaDinuzulu (1900-1984), daughter of King Dinuzulu (direct lineage of Shaka), and mother of South Africa's former home affairs minister and Zulu chief, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, was a gifted musician and teacher who played an important role in saving the cultural heritage of the Zulu nation when the British tried to annihilate it.

Even though Magogo enjoyed a long life, reaching the age of eighty-four, the opera deals only with the first twenty-three years, presented as flashbacks from her deathbed. Christopher Ballantine makes the following observations:

But that short span is sufficient for the opera to make its fundamental ideological points, all of them matters of agitation and debate in recent South African history. Simplifying only a little, I take these to be, above all, ethnic Zulu nationalism and the struggle against colonial rule. (King Dinuzulu's dispute with the rebellious Bambatha mimics some of the disagreements, in apartheid's final decades, between Mango-

suthu Buthelezi's Zulu nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party and the African National Congress.) Also vividly in the frame are patriotism, cultural heritage, peace, reconciliation, and the widely supported goal of an 'African Renaissance.' (2002:952)

Mzilikazi Khumalo used a number of songs composed by Princess Magogo to form the kernel of the opera. *Magogo* is heavily reliant on traditional melodies and a libretto written in Zulu, an indigenous language. The music approximates the natural inflections of Zulu, which employs three tonal phonemes to help denote meaning. Complex cross-rhythms and five or six-note scales/modes complete the picture. The reviewers remember Khumalo showing how much spoken Zulu is like music with its tonal levels, flowing contours and gliding effects. He tried to incorporate these elements into the written melodies of his opera, demonstrated by clicks and gliding effects in the vocal line. John Von Rhein makes the following observation:

The opera draws on the richly hybrid music known as 'Makwaya', a fusion of traditional indigenous elements with Western Oratorio and Hymnody. It is permeated by the melodies, harmonies and rhythms of Zulu music. The vocal writing closely follows the rising, falling and gliding contours of native speech, with its distinctive clicks of the tongue. (2004:1)

Ballantine argues:

Of course, the idea of trying to avoid all idea of a Western aesthetic, whatever that might mean, would have made no sense: since Khumalo's makwaya-based score was already a hybrid of Zulu and Western features fused through the processes of colonialism – indeed the Zulu history told in the opera is inseparable from the story of modernization – the West was already there. (2002:951)

Khumalo wrote the vocal score in tonic-solfa, which is in keeping with the usual African practice of notating music. Michael Hankinson was commissioned to add texture and harmonic structure and to provide an orchestral score.

Hankinson's work demanded a greater creative involvement than would usually be the case when orchestrating a piano part where suggestions for a harmonic and rhythmic structure already exist. I therefore cannot agree with the view that Khumalo was solely responsible for the composition as he was not instrumental in shaping the final product. According to Kenneth Richardson:

Khumalo's melodies, as all Zulu music, is [sic] modal, yet at times it tantalizingly explores the wilder reaches of tonality. Combined with Hankinson's orchestrations, Janacek is not alien. Hankinson's skill allied to Khumalo's genius, come together at the end of Act I, in an extraordinary pastiche, yet in a wholly Zulu context, of a great Verdi Finale. (2002:108)

Hankinson's research, which took the best part of six months, led him to tapes of Zulu music and the Princess's singing recorded by Andrew Tracey and kept in the International Library of African Music. This gave him some idea of the idiom involved when he wrote all the interludes as well as the transitional sections.⁸ This is therefore a collaborative work and cannot be labelled the first South African opera by a black composer. All claims made by Opera Africa in this regard are in effect part of their marketing strategy, especially on the international scene. Regarding the orchestration, Anthony Tommasini from the New York Times comments:

⁸ Personal communication in an interview with Michael Hankinson, 20 October 2004.

I will not soon forget how moving it was to hear Mr Khumalo during the pre-performance talk singing melodies from his opera in his weathered voice. He doesn't have to add palatable Western-style orchestral harmonies to his music to call a score an opera. (2004:3)

The implication that no orchestration was necessary challenges the assumption that an opera such as this should always involve a western-type orchestra to provide the accompanying body of instruments. It is a challenge that Khumalo did not take up, and certainly presents one that composers could consider.

Tommasini believes that by adding 'lush, resonant chords in the orchestration', Hankinson changed the nature of the traditional sound. Consequently much of his orchestration could be mistaken for 'a film score to accompany a Zulu epic'.

The opera was performed at the Ravinia Festival in Chicago in June 2004. The fusion of Zulu music with a Western style apparently caused 'some confusion' for the American audience. Moreover, the Zulu themes are cyclic while in Western music they are expected to have a forward-looking development. In addition Zulu music scales are also very different from classical Western ones. Michael Cameron comments on the problem as follows:

Herein lies a central dilemma of the concept. Much African music relies on linear repetition, whereas Western art music generally depends on long-term structural plans and development. When the opera minimises its roots, the limited material eventually loses some of its dramatic effect.

In addition, it became apparent as the evening progressed that the musical substance, despite its considerable allure, was not quite sufficient to sustain a nearly three-hour musical drama. (2004:Sec5)

Sandra de Villiers, who founded Opera Africa⁹ in 1995 states that the opera has been substantially revised and that structural weaknesses and other dramatic inconsistencies have been addressed. A national tour of the revised opera was scheduled for February/March 2006. Its European première was envisaged to take place at the Het Muziektheater, Amsterdam, in May 2006.

Classification

Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu may be classified as a South African work because it is based on the life of a national figure and her songs, and because it reflects the Zulu heritage in South Africa. The remainder of the melodic material was composed by a South African, and adheres per se to the musical inflections and intonations of the indigenous Zulu language.

Categorisation

Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu may be categorised as an opera rather than music theatre because the music is the force that carries the drama. Apart from the warrior dances and praise singer scenes there is not much by way of action. The scenes are a series of tableaux, but this does not affect the categorisation since 'static' operas have already been written by Strauss (*Elektra*) and

⁹ Opera Africa is a Durban-based touring company that was established to promote opera in outlying districts.

Stravinsky (*Oedipus Rex*). Because of the small amount of dialogue and lack of action, it could also successfully be presented as a concert performance if the warrior dances were omitted.

Two different issues have been raised regarding this work:

- (i) Varying international opinions raised the question regarding the fusion of musical styles (c.f. Von Rhein's statement (2004:1)). However, this approach was not perceived as a problem locally.
- (ii) In South Africa the more important issue of authorship needs to be clarified.

earthdiving

Based on a folktale

Music Péter Louis van Dijk, Martin Phipps & Mokhale Koapeng
Libretto Nancy Duiguid & Nan Hamilton
Director Nancy Duiguid / Nan Hamilton
Conductor Xandi van Dijk

Première at Spier Amphitheatre on 7 March 2003

in collaboration with Cape Town Opera, Artscape, Dedel'ingoma Music-Theatre Company, The Cape Philharmonic Orchestra and The Western Cape Cultural Commission.

Further performances on 12, 14 and 15 March 2003.

Characters	Voice type	First Performance Cast
Makor , storyteller and guide	Speaker	Aletta Bezuidenhout
Child , the witness	Boy Soprano	James Stent
Namdende , mother earth	Mezzo soprano	Ntombizodumo Mahlaba
Nokwanda , the daughter	Lyrical Soprano	Nkozasana Dimande
Senyaka , lord of the dead	Baritone	Philisa Sibeko
Sango , father sky	Bass	Mandlenkosi Mkhize
Baubo , the wild one	Mezzo soprano	Abel Moeng
Flies		Miranda Tini
		Kwezi Davani, Richard Mbovane, Collen Tontsi

Dancers

Eland Spirit/Shadow
Fly/Shadow

Yarisha Singh
 Hürgen Cornelson

Orchestration

2 Flutes
 2 Oboes
 2 Clarinets
 2 Bassoons
 4 Horns
 3 Trumpets
 2 Trombones
 1 Bass Trombone
 Tuba
 2 Saxophones
 Piano
 Harp
 Timpani
 Percussion
 Strings

Synopsis¹⁰

Prologue

Makor, the storyteller, remembering mankind's fall from grace, urges the lost to dive into the earth of their soul, the body, in order to bring about change. The Child bears witness.

Scene 1: Creation

Nokwanda, daughter of Namdende, bonds with an eland spirit. When older, Nokwanda enquires about Sango, her father, and begins to break away from her mother. She heeds the call of the underworld as Makor encourages her to begin the 'earthdive'.

Scene 2: Separation

Nokwanda is seduced by her uncle, Sango's evil brother, Senyaka. After the novelty of his charms wears off, Nokwanda seeks the assistance of the eland spirit, but cannot be freed because Senyaka's host of flies attack the spirit. Senyaka thanks Sango, his brother, for Nokwanda and gleefully descends with his new queen into the underworld.



A scene from *earthdiving*.

¹⁰ Condensed version of synopsis found in programme notes, by kind permission of Péter Louis van Dijk.

Scene 3: Loss

Namdende feels the loss of her daughter and, driven by guilt, she begins to search for her. Namdende cannot forgive Sango for stealing her kingdom, raping her and then assisting in the abduction of her daughter. The angry Namdende curses the world and undertakes to withhold her powers of fertility until she is able to see her daughter again. Makor initiates Namdende's 'earthdive'.

Scene 4: The Underworld

Nokwanda rejects Senyaka with all his riches and refuses to eat after learning about Senyaka and her father's scheme. Senyaka, nevertheless, gradually falls in love with Nokwanda.

Scene 5: World

Namdende's curse gives rise to a drought and, consequently, a flood of refugees who accost Sango. As a result of being attacked by Namdende, and blamed by Senyaka who fears for Nokwanda's life, Sango suffers a heart attack and is forced into his own 'earthdive'.

Scene 6: Baubo

Namdende is blamed by the women of the community for the hunger caused by the drought. Baubo implores the women to bring about change, and Namdende heeds, but only after she hears her daughter's call. Namdende is assisted by Makor in trying to recapture Nokwanda.

Scene 7: The Return

While recovering from his heart attack, Sango is filled with remorse for all his wrongdoing. The Child bears witness as the brothers reflect on their shortcomings. Nokwanda returns and reaches out to her mother who is in deep meditation. Forgiveness abounds, and the resultant rain is soaked up by the barren earth. Nokwanda appeals to all concerned to live in peace, and the brothers yield to the 'earthdive'. The child bears witness to these events.

Discussion of *earthdiving*

The programme notes state that *earthdiving* is an opera that tells of 'the changing forces prevalent in society and of healing taking place in the family circle, the community and the environment'. Issues and fears are dealt with as the human spirit delves into the unconscious in order to surface again, cleansed. The four characters undergo a transformation and emerge revitalised. The opera thus 'invites one to heal oneself' and, in so doing, to take a 'vital step towards healing the planet'. If one adapts this to the South African context, then it is reminiscent of the peace and reconciliation process. With the advent of a new democracy, a 'rebirth' took place and is depicted in the myth, self-healing being an essential part of the process that is accompanied by much pain and regret. The duet between the two brothers, Sango and Senyaka, in scene 7 refers to it: they sing of their plundering, rape and deceit while the women leave them to their business that is the industrious underworld:

We sow our seeds - we bully and rape,
 We feed our greed and bully and rape,
 We pillage and plunder, we work and superachieve,
 We work, we compete, we deceive, as our women threaten and curse and leave us to ourselves.
 What have we left? – Loneliness, Emptiness.

The result leaves the people (refugees in the tale) prone to ‘ravages of industry, war and consumerism’ (Namdende’s curse on the men is reminiscent of the Queen of the Night’s curse on her daughter Pamina in Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*).

This eventually yields to a trio between Nokwanda, Namdende and the Child (the Old Woman meanwhile continuing to speak in rhythm as she does in an earlier scene) singing of the triumph of good over evil (a parallel to *Die Zauberflöte*):

My hair will yield rain
 My laughter will heal pain
 I can be the perfect face of God within
 We can be a conscious face of me.

The story is based on African folklore but is problematic because it attempts to create a fusion of Greek and African mythology. Fourie (2003:5) states:

earthdiving is firmly built upon African folklore, yet speaks of universal themes, such as familial relationships and the need of forgiveness and restoration. As such, the story is accessible to any audience.

Wilhelm Snyman (2003:7) explains how

The libretto takes the basic structure of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone and places it in an African milieu. In Greek mythology, Demeter is the goddess of agriculture, of the harvest, and the grain: a type of earth goddess and the mother goddess. Persephone is the daughter of Zeus and Demeter: the Maiden of Spring.

In the African myth, Namdende represents Demeter and Nokwanda, her daughter, Persephone. Sango is Zeus and his evil brother, Senyaka, Hades. The translation of the Greek myth poses a problem in that it tends to interfere with the African version of the story.

Snyman (2003:7) makes the comment that ‘Duiguid and Hamilton were perhaps trying to say too much’ and that the text would possibly have been more effective if it had been simplified, thereby avoiding the confusion surrounding the illogical nature of the myth.

Indigenous influences were evident in the dancing by the women and in their singing as a chorus, in the chanting (scenes 2 and 4) and predominantly in the prevailing beat of the drum. The costumes were not traditional but did reflect the spirit of Africa, as did the set that effectively portrayed an African landscape by using a silhouetted mountain range backdrop. Projections and special lighting effects added immensely to the overall impression. Andrew Gilder (2003:7) quotes Boyzie Cekwana, the choreographer, as saying:

An interesting theatrical device is to have the dancers represent the shadows of the characters of the lovers. Singh, for example, is the Eland spirit representing the girl. This allows the dancers to physicalise the intent underlying the actions of the characters.

The opera begins with narration by the storyteller, Makor, which later develops into a dialogue, superimposed on the orchestra and the chorus. Rhythmical speech accompanied by drumming becomes a feature in further scenes. This serves to energise the dancers who provide much of the visual impact of the production.

The style of the music is eclectic, but generally Western, and - as critics pointed out - there are influences both from Stravinsky and from jazz and African percussion. Gilder (2003:7) observes:

Mokale Koapeng, Martin Phipps and Péter Louis van Dijk conceived of the score as a dialogue between African, choral and ritual music with European contemporary, classical and operatic music and jazz.

The percussion writing is jagged, and there are pelting rhythms abounding in the melodic percussion. Conductor, Xandi van Dijk, refers to the music as 'a mixture of washy impressionism, techno and hard-core with neo-African, minimalist touches'. He also commented on the 'petroushka-ish' links, with special reference to the one at the end of scene 1 that leads into the techno style in scene 2. Péter Louis van Dijk and Martin Phipps' orchestration is copious and rather impressionistic, very similar to the rich film-type scoring for which Phipps is generally known.¹¹

Initially Phipps was responsible for writing and orchestrating two of the scenes relating to the underworld, while Koapeng did the other five that were of an African nature, most of which was unusable. And so Péter Louis van Dijk was called in to finalise the writing and orchestration of the opera in a very limited time. He found the libretto lacking in many respects and recounts 'having to cut and adapt certain parts of the text to suit my somewhat pressured needs'. The libretto was still in a state of flux at the stage where a work that was about to be performed was still being shaped and edited.¹²

Van Dijk completed the collaboration process by making use of existing rhythms and elements and then expanding them and attempting unification by introducing leitmotifs into the orchestration. He states that he actually used very little of Koapeng's or Phipps's music, except to refer to certain rhythmical and harmonic ideas in order to create a cohesion of some sort. He also claims to have written the bulk of the music by mimicking Koapeng and Phipps where necessary, orchestrating the entire opera with the exception of Phipps's two scenes. Van Dijk found Koapeng's scene 6 acceptable and 'adapted, reworked and reharmonised' it. 'The jazzy rhythms were fun', he said and decided to employ them in the reworking. When one compares van Dijk's work with Phipps's, it becomes noticeable how different the two styles are.

The weakness of the libretto is evident in the lack of forward drive towards any climactic point. It is for this very reason that Van Dijk 'built in many musical climaxes'. Structurally, the opera is not straightforward, and it is questionable whether there was clarity at the inception of the project. Van Dijk states that 'there was a lack of a clear sense of direction in general and unity

¹¹ Personal communication in an interview with Xandi van Dijk, 1 August 2005.

¹² Personal communication with Péter Louis van Dijk.

amongst the five participants.¹³ (Duigood, Hamilton, Koapeng, Phipps and Van Dijk). Willoughby sums up the situation cogently:

The pity is that the result of so much creative ferment and manifold industry proves disappointing. The problem with earthdiving is the old South African bugbear of fudged artistic purpose: what might have been a salutary idea in the brain of a controlling visionary backfires in the minds of a committee. Many hands in the theatre do not necessarily make light work; or to change the metaphor, one cook in charge is needed to save the broth. (2003:1)

The only consistency lies within the treatment of the text where words, phrases and sentences are constantly repeated, which suggests that the script was not of sufficient length nor suitable for operatic treatment.

Classification

earthdiving may be classified as a South African work because it is based on African folklore associated with a strong peace and reconciliation message. The score assimilates rhythmic African drumming patterns that interweave and fuse with the Western rhythms in a way that is reminiscent of Stravinsky's ballets. The dancing and female choruses provide an added African dimension.

Categorisation

One could categorise this work as an opera because it is 'sung-through'. It fails because of the inherent lack of cohesion that may perhaps be attributed to the fact that it is a collaborative work by three composers and two librettists. There is no forward drive and the structure fragments into a series of tableaux. However this does not affect the categorisation of the work as an opera (see discussion of *Princess Magogo kaDimuzulu* on page 47).

The following reviews may be found in Appendix D:

Love & Green Onions

Carew, D. 2001. 'Opera that's not an opera' has it all, *Sunday Argus*: 16, July 21/22.

Chisholm, F. 2001. Première tonight of Zakes Mda's operatic love tale, *The Cape Times*: 9, June 28.

Fourie, C. 2001. Eclectic new musical could be a trendsetter for future productions, *The Cape Argus*: July 25. (See appendix D: 3-5)

Mabanga, T. 2001. Mda goes to the opera, *Mail & Guardian*: 6, June 8-14.

Wasserman, H. 2001. Jazz of nie, eiesoortige opera bly 'n mens by, *Die Burger*: 4, July 2.

¹³ Personal communication with Péter Louis van Dijk, July 26, 2005.

Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu

- Ballantine, C. 2002. Opera for Africa, *Opera*. 53: 950–954.
- Cameron, M. 2004. Cast delights despite ‘Magogo’s’ shortcomings, *Chicago Tribune*: Sec 5, June 7.
- Delacoma, W. 2004. S. African opera is promising start to Ravinia’s 100th, *Chicago Sun*: 28A, June 6.
- Grant, J. 2004. From the Zulu nation to the heart of Chicago, *Financial Times*: June 1. (See appendix D: 15)
- Midgette, A. 2004. An aria for post-apartheid Africa, *New York Times*: 23-24, May 30.
- Richardson, K. 2002. ‘Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu’, *Opera Now*. 6: 108.
- Tommasini, A. 2004. Varied cultures entwine around a Zulu princess, *New York Times*: 3, June 2.
- Von Rhein, J. 2004. Zulu opera makes U.S. première, *Chicago Tribune*: 1,13, May 30.

Earthdiving

- Chisholm, F. 2003. A celebration of life spirit, *Mail & Guardian*: March 15. (See appendix D: 24-25)
- Fourie, C. 2003. Opera music hits discord, *The Cape Argus*: 5, March 11.
- Gilder, A. 2003. ‘earthdiving’ opera sees Cekwana back in SA, *The Cape Times*: 7, March 6.
- Kooij, P. 2003. Nuwe opera vol emosie, *Die Burger*: 4, March 10.
- Snyman, W. 2003. New African work of art hits high note, *The Cape Times*: 7, March 11.
- Willoughby, G. 2003. Bravo! Spier opera season in full voice, *Mail & Guardian*: 1, March 14-19.

CHAPTER FOUR: OPERAS BY HENDRIK HOFMEYR

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

One-act chamber opera based on a story by Edgar Allan Poe.

Composer and Librettist **Hendrik Hofmeyr**
Conductor **Neville Dove**
Director **Michael Williams**

Première on 24 November 1988 at the Arena of the State Theatre

Characters	Voice type	First Performance Cast
Madeline Usher	Soprano	Mari Opperman
Narrator	Tenor	Johan Botha
Roderick Usher	Bass/Baritone	Pierre du Toit
Friend	Tenor	Willie van Staden
The Servant	Mute	Dewald Norval

Orchestration

Piccolo/Flute/Alto Flute

Oboe/English Horn

Clarinet in B flat/Bass Clarinet in B flat

Bassoon

Horn in F

Percussion (2 players): 4 Timpani, Bass drum, Snare drum, 2 Suspended Cymbals, Large Gong, Triangle, Wood block, Tambourine, Whip, Rattle, Xylophone, Vibraphone, Tubular bells, Saw (or Flexitone)

Harp

String Quartet (with 5-stringed Double Bass)

Synopsis¹

Prelude

The friend of the Ushers approaches the dismal looking house and proceeds to inspect a crevice in the wall. Their Servant appears from the shadows of the archway and escorts the friend to meet Usher.

¹ Synopsis summarised from the libretto in the musical score, by kind permission of Hendrik Hofmeyr.

Scene 1: Usher's room

Usher is overwhelmed by his friend's response to his letter of invitation. Usher has not been well, and the morbid house seems to have affected his disposition. Madeline, his twin sister, enters in a trance-like state, singing a doleful song and then collapses. The servant carries her off to her room, and Usher begs his friend not to leave him on his own.

Interlude**Scene 2: Usher's room / Madeline's room**

The friend spends days with Usher trying to sooth his troubled spirit. There is no talk of Madeline until the night of her death.

Interlude: They make their way to Madeline's room to fetch her body for burial.

Usher and his friend take her coffin to the dungeon below the house. There the friend is affected by her expression that is so much like that of her twin, Usher.

Scene 3: The friend's room

It is a week since Madeline's passing and Usher's friend cannot endure much more of the morbid situation. A storm brews outside and it fills him with terror. Usher knocks at the door of his friend's room, and upon entering, goes to the window. He points out the rising vapours from the tarn which he believes will envelop the house. His friend attempts to console Usher by reading to him from a book entitled the 'Mad Tryst'. Sound effects matching the story being read are heard in the house as the Friend continues reading.

Suddenly there is a clangour that alarms his friend. Usher comes to the realization that they have mistakenly placed Madeline, alive, in the tomb. Usher now admits to having previously heard movements in the coffin as they presently hear it being ripped open and gate hinges tearing loose. The door is blown open by a strong wind, and the bloodied Madeline stands in the doorway. She then collapses onto Usher who dies instantly.

Postlude

The friend dashes from the house only to see the thread-like crevice widen and then expand until the house collapses and disappears into the tarn.

Discussion of *Fall of the House of Usher*

Hendrik Hofmeyr has composed the following operas to date: *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *Lumukanda*, *The Land of Heart's Desire*, *Die Laaste Aand* and *Bluebeard* (an early work).

Even though *The Fall of the House of Usher* was written and performed before 1994, it needs to be included in my discussion since, thus far, it is the only opera by Hofmeyr that has been

performed. While *Lumukanda* would be the ideal work to discuss, considering that it was conceived between 1993 and 1996, and that the libretto is set in Africa, both Hofmeyr and many South African composers often have difficulties in finding producers willing to grant them premières. It is all the more admirable then that PACT in collaboration with the Opera School of the Pretoria Technikon whose director at the time was Emma Scheepers,² decided to stage *Usher*. A discussion of *The Fall of the House of Usher* is therefore included in the hope of its attracting further attention to Hofmeyr's unperformed operas which, in my opinion, have considerable merit. Also included are synopses, cast lists and orchestration for Hofmeyr's unperformed operas to make the list of works discussed in this paper more comprehensive.

The Fall of the House of Usher was the winning entry for a competition organized by The Department of National Education in 1987 and performed at the Arena of the State Theatre, Pretoria in 1988. It was presented by PACT Opera in collaboration with the Opera School at the Pretoria Technikon.

The text of *The Fall of the House of Usher* is of a gothic, melodramatic nature that makes it suitable for operatic treatment. The composer attempts to create the visual element (atmosphere) in his music to conjure up the destruction, death and the existential void present in Poe's horror story. Eichbaum (1988:7) notes that 'Visual imagery is skilfully mirrored in every bar of the score which instils in the listener an eerie and growing sense of unease as Poe's masterful Gothic horror plot unfolds'. Odendaal (1988:E8)³ quotes Hofmeyr as saying that 'Poe's use of language is unique and eccentric. You need to retain that'. (Poe – Sy taalgebruik is eiesoortig en eksentriek. Jy moet dit behou.) The composer labels his style 'Expressivity, music that conveys something.' Accordingly he tries to capture Edgar Allan Poe's highly charged text in *The Fall of the House of Usher*. He also feels that only the essentials are necessary and therefore always writes his own libretti. He states furthermore that opera should 'dwell on extraordinary or supernatural topics', and also that 'opera is not musical prose, and therefore, should not be a vehicle of small talk' (in conversation mentioning 'kitchen-sink opera'), but it must do what opera does best, namely, letting the music convey what is absent in the script.⁴ 'In opera, however, one cannot make use of such density of language; you have to contract and simplify because it's hard in opera to catch the words'.⁵

The composer refers to this approach in the opening four bars of the score in which the violins announce the descending 'fissure' motif (consisting of a semi-tone followed by a tri-tone), its zig-zag pattern suggesting the crack, and eventually depicting the disintegration of the house and its ultimate disappearance into the tarn.

This motif reappears in different guises throughout the work but makes a prominent appearance at the beginning of scene 3 (storm scene) when it is used to graphically illustrate or set the atmosphere for the storm that is brewing.

² Emma Scheepers: better known by her stage name; Emma Renzi.

³ See appendix E: 8

⁴ Personal communication in an interview with Hendrik Hofmeyr, 10 August 2005.

⁵ Hofmeyr quoted by Farquharsen (1988:19).

Since Hofmeyr was writing for competition purposes, his structure had to conform to requirements stipulated by the organizers. He had to submit an outline of the intended arias interspersed with lyrical recitative, thus creating a general fabric that is symphonic in nature. There are set numbers that flow in and out of the musical texture. Riek Van Rensburg (1988:16) points out that 'The opera operates on the level of surface effectiveness, but also sustains a sort of symphonic argument, almost intravenously as well as cerebrally'. On the other hand Louis Heyneman (1988:E5)⁶ maintains that 'structurally, the opera is a combination of typical elements of the genre employed economically and minimalistically'. This is partly due to the small number of instruments, and the thematic material; each sound, however small, is functional. ('Struktureel is die opera 'n samevatting van tipiese elemente van die genre, spaarsamig en minimalisties ingespan. Die minimalisme is ook heg verweef in die klankstruktuur – veral met die effektiewe gebruik van 'n klein aantal instrumente').

Hofmeyr regards the Puccini and later Verdi operas as the ultimate models of integration in declamation and lyrical recitative. It has been said that the opera under discussion owes its format and vocal style to Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*. Eichbaum observes:

The work shows influences from Britten's *Turn of the Screw* in its economic scoring for twelve instruments – also sinister connotations forming the basis of the plot. His use of these instruments is full-sounding...the score demands exceptional virtuosity on the part of the musicians, particularly in the many and varied passages of chamber music-like delicacy. (1988:6/7)

The composer goes on to say that his vocal style differs from Britten's, but that they probably share the same aesthetic goals, and that because both use the English language to formulate their texts, Britten's modern and operatic style might have exerted an influence. Hofmeyr also mentions parallels to Purcell's vocal style in his own work, since the rhythm inherent in English conjures up similar stylistic associations.⁷ When questioned about his method of writing for the voice, he mentions these guidelines:

- Avoid repeated notes above the 'break'.
- Avoid consecutive leaps in the same direction.
- Notes in the extreme registers need the correct approach.
- Certain vowel sounds should be restricted on certain notes, 'i's' on high notes for example.

A general respect for what the voice does best and what is most comfortable can be taken as a rule if one wants to contribute to the genre.

This method contradicts the modernist 'anti-operatic' approach where singers' voices are treated more like non-human instruments.

According to Hofmeyr, the music of contemporary opera needs emotional justification, and that accordingly the emotional shape of the arias should supply one with a sense of arrival, providing a focal point in every opera. He is not fond of using the declamatory style but prefers to make his music 'singable'. Sutcliffe observes:

⁶ See appendix E: 5

⁷ Personal communication in an interview with Hendrik Hofmeyr, 26 June 2006.

Song remains what draws the public to an interest in operatic material. Song is what is memorable. Song is the means whereby the themes and ideas of past operas are brought to life. Poetry must sing. Poetic drama must sing. When it can once again, opera will have found a voice for the new millennium. (1996:425)

Hofmeyr himself says that he dislikes 'sitcom operas'⁸ and tends towards Britten's concept of opera 'where the voice is the prime vehicle for the music as well as the drama'. Like Britten he prefers the orchestra to 'create environments'. 'It has to enhance what the voice is doing rather than compete with it' - which is in contrast to Wagner where the instrumental forces are overwhelming.

When one studies the score one realises that the instruments take part in the musical dialogue by playing the same lyrical themes that have previously been sung, fragments of which become enmeshed in the general symphonic fabric. I therefore cannot agree with Betsie Smit's statement that 'The orchestra seldom came to the fore to participate lyrically in the drama. The music is very effective as accompaniment and atmospheric as film music would be'. (1988:4)

Hofmeyr says that the tonal idiom of his operas relies both on the use of the Phrygian mode because of its expressive possibilities as well as on the octatonic and hexatonic scales.⁹ He applies a free integration of these scales in his work without being dogmatic or systematic about any particular one of them. The 'fissure' motif is a slightly altered version of the octotonic scale, while Madelein's aria, for example, is written in the Phrygian mode.¹⁰ More extensive use of the single octotonic and hexatonic scales may be found in *Lumukanda*.

Classification

The Fall of the House of Usher cannot be classified as a South African work not only because it is based on a gothic horror tale by Edgar Allan Poe but also because it has certain associations with English literature, including, for example, a poem by William Blake that is sung by Madeline. The inclusion of the 'Dies Irae' chant from the Requiem Mass also compromises its status as purely South African.

Categorisation

This is a one-act chamber opera in the traditional style since it is both serious and a 'sung-through' work. Refer to the definition as set out in the introduction of this paper.

⁸ sitcom = situational comedy ; a television genre.

⁹ Refer to chapter two for the structure of octatonic ; tone, semi-tone etc
Hexatonic: tone, 3 semitones etc

¹⁰ Personal communication in an interview with Hendrik Hofmeyr, 10 August 2005.

THE LAND OF HEART'S DESIRE

One-act chamber opera based on a tale by William Butler Yates. Composed as a companion opera to *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

Written in 1989

Characters

A faery child
Mary Bruin
Bridget Bruin
Shawn Bruin
Maurteen Bruin
Father Hart

Voice type

light lyric soprano
lyric soprano
mezzo soprano
tenor
baritone
bass

Orchestration

Flute/Piccolo/Alto Flute
Oboe/English Horn
Clarinet/Bass Clarinet
Bassoon
French Horn
Harp
2 Percussion
Strings

Synopsis⁸

The action takes place in a rustic dwelling in Ireland in the remote past. Maurteen Bruin defends his daughter-in-law, Mary, when his wife, Bridget, complains about her indolence to Father Hart. Mary stands at the door reading a book of faery legends. Maurteen asks if she has hung the branch of blessed quicken wood upon the doorpost, as newly wedded brides may be stolen by the faeries on May Eve. She replies that she has, but that it has been removed by a strange child. She takes a cup of milk outside to the child, and later takes a sod from the fire to light the pipe of a little old man. When Bridget accuses her of bringing evil upon the house, she calls on the faeries to take her away as she is weary of all of them, including her husband, Shawn, despite the fact that she loves him. When the child is heard singing outside, Maurteen fetches her in, and they all make a fuss of her. She shrieks when she sees the crucifix on the wall, and Father Hart takes it down. After dancing around the room, she reveals that she is of the faery people, and invites Mary to go with her who, torn between the alluring visions of the faery child and the pleas of the others, finally succumbs and dies as the child departs.

⁸ Synopsis condensed from libretto, by kind permission of Hendrik Hofmeyr.

Classification

The Land of Heart's Desire cannot be classified as a South African work because it is based on an Irish tale and the musical score evokes Irish folk tunes.

Categorisation

This work is a one-act chamber opera in the traditional style.

LUMUKANDA

Three-act opera after a book on an African subject by Credo Mutwa,
Indaba, my children

Characters

The High Priestess

Ninavanhu-Ma, the Goddess of Life

Timara, a wealthy Phoenician (or Ma-iti)

Watamaraka, the Goddess of Evil

Two Priestesses

Makira, a sorceress, widow of Emperor Kadesi

Mulinda, an African slave, mother of Lumukanda

Luluma, an African slave

Two Ma-iti

Lumukanda, an African slave

Sidaru, a wealthy Ma-iti

Lubu, an African slave

Karesu, Emperor of the Ma-iti

Ma-iti, Slaves (off-stage), Demon spirits (invisible)

Other Ma-iti, Slaves and guards

Voice Types

coloratura soprano

lyric soprano

lyric spinto soprano

dramatic soprano

mezzo soprano

dramatic mezzo

contralto

mute female dancer

tenors

heroic tenor

comic bass/baritone

bass

deep bass

chorus

mute

Orchestration

4 Flutes (III also Piccolo; IV. also Piccolo and Flute in G)

3 Oboes (III also Cor Anglais)

4 Clarinets in B flat (II. also Clarinets in E flat;

III and IV also Bass Clarinets in B flat (with low C)

3 Bassoons

4 Horns

3 Trumpets (I and II also Trumpets in C and D; III also Trumpet in C)

2 Trombones (with F and E crooks)

Tuba

4 Timpani

Percussion: Bass Drum, Tenor Drum, Field Drum, Snare Drum, Tambourine, Large Tam-tam, Suspended Cymbal, Cymbals, Triangle, Woodblock, 5 Chinese Woodblocks, Guiro, Whip, Bells, Glockenspiel, Vibraphone, Xylophone, Marimba

Pianoforte (and Celeste)

Harp

Strings (with 5-stringed Double Bass)

Synopsis⁹

ACT I

Scene 1: A hall in Sidaru's palace.

A nocturnal feast is in progress. Sidaru wagers that his slave, Lumukanda, will defeat any other slave in armed combat. The wager is taken up by Timara who orders one of her slaves, a tall female, to fight him. She is defeated by Lumukanda, but before dying, she recognizes him as her

⁹ Synopsis condensed from libretto, by kind permission of Hendrik Hofmeyr.

own son, taken from her at a tender age in accordance with the laws governing slavery at that time. His friend Luluma strives in vain to console him. The sorceress Makira enters and surreptitiously informs Sidaru that she has succeeded in assassinating the male consort of Karesu, the hated emperor. She recognizes Lumukanda as the prophesied destroyer of the empire and orders that he be drowned in the Makarikari Lake.

Scene 2: The shores of Lake Makarikari.

Lumukanda comes to his senses after being saved by Ninavanhu-Ma, the Goddess of Life. She has chosen him as her companion, and soon overcomes his rather marked reluctance to accept her.

ACT II

Scene 1: The great hall of the Imperial Palace.

Makira has defeated Karesu and, acclaimed by the people, Sidaru presents her with Luluma as a celebratory gift. Before being executed, Karesu warns that the empire is in grave danger as Lumukanda is not dead. Makira then resolves to enlist the aid of Watamaraka, the Goddess of Evil in solving this problem.

Scene 2: The temple of the Black Demon.

Makira, attended by Luluma, is subjected to humiliation rites to prepare her for meeting Watamaraka. When the latter appears, she informs Makira that the only way to save the empire would be for her to yield her mortal frame to the goddess who would rule as empress. Makira objects, and Watamakara appears to take Luluma in her stead. In the subsequent ceremony, however, Makira's soul is transported into Luluma's body, while the former's body is taken over by Watamaraka. The latter then orders that Makira be locked up in the dungeons.

ACT III

Scene 1: The shores of Lake Makarikari.

Makira has escaped, and comes to warn Lumukanda of Watamaraka's intention to use the empire as a tool in the destruction of the human race. Ninavanhu-Ma decides that the time has come to intervene and instructs Lumukanda to lead a rebellion of the slaves.

Scene II: The great hall of the Imperial Palace.

As slaves are being executed by Watamaraka, Sidaru brings news that the city gates have fallen to the rebels. Shortly after, Lumukanda enters at the head of the rebel army. As Watamaraka is about to unleash her divine powers, Ninavanhu-Ma intervenes, transporting her to Outer Darkness in a flash of light. After admonishing the Ma-iti and the slaves to embrace as fellow men, and then appointing Lumukanda as their new leader, she departs. A mortally wounded Makira is carried in and, before expiring, blesses the land.

Classification

Lumukanda may be classified as a South African work because it is based on Nguni mythology with Hofmeyr inventing his own exoticism by weaving West African rhythms into the music's fabric.

Categorisation

This work is a three-act opera in traditional style.

DIE LAASTE AAND

One-act chamber opera after *Van Noot se Laaste Aand* and *Die Laaste Aand*
By C Louis Leipoldt

Written in 2001

Characters

Martha, a blind Malay woman
Abdoel, a Malay slave
Guard
Merchant
Councillor
Gysbreg van Noot, Govenor of the Cape

Voice type

lyric soprano
tenor
baritone
baritone
bass
bass

Orchestration :

Flute
Oboe/English Horn
Clarinet/Bass Clarinet
Bassoon/Contrabassoon
French Horn
Double Bass
Percussion (Bass Drum, Snare Drum, Suspended Cymbal, Tam-tam, Bells, Vibraphone)
Strings

Synopsis¹⁰

The action takes place in a room in the Castle in Cape Town during the eighteenth century. A Moslem servant, Abdoel, and a guard discuss the imminent execution of the compiler of a petition against Governor Van Noot. An old blind woman is led in. Abdoel recognizes her as Martha and, before slipping away, warns the guard that she has magic powers. Martha tries to convince the guard to allow her to speak to the governor. When he hesitates, she tells him that she knows he was a friend of the rebels' leader, Gysbreg. She conceals herself when a merchant and a councillor enter. They send the guard away with a letter, and then discuss plans to forestall the execution. She interrupts them, revealing that she is a Javanese Princess, and that she had followed Van Noot from Jakarta where they had been lovers. Then she assures them that she can halt the execution. As Van Noot is heard approaching, they leave her alone in the room. Van Noot, unaware of her presence, enters, complaining about a pain in his left arm. Martha interrupts him and reveals her identity, convincing him by showing him the kris¹¹ on which he had pledged his troth. When he refuses to yield to her pleas that he set the prisoners free, she reveals that Gysbreg is their child. Van Noot sinks into the chair in shock. Martha's further pleas are greeted with silence, and when she threatens Van Noot with the kris, she realises that he is dead. As the others re-enter with the news that the rebels have been executed, the distraught Martha throws herself on the kris.

¹⁰ Synopsis condensed from libretto, by kind permission of Hendrik Hofmeyr.

¹¹ kris: An Indonesian dagger with a wavy blade

Classification

Die Laaste Aand may be classified as a South African work because the libretto is based on a local text, and the inclusion of the Malay song sung by Abdoel adds a further South African dimension to the score.

Categorisation

This work, like all the other operas by Hofmeyr, is an opera in the traditional sense of the word.

The following reviews may be found in Appendix E :

- Eichbaum, J. 1989. South Africa prizewinning première, *Opera*. 40:346.
- Eichbaum, J. 1989. Première of a new South African opera: 'The Fall of the House of Usher', *Scenaria*. 96: 6-8.
- Daniel, R. 1988. Ambience 'horor'opera. *The Citizen*: 21, November 29.
- Farquharson, M. 1988. Hofmeyr adds a gothic touch. *The Pretoria News*: 2, November 25.
- Grové, S. 1988. Hofmeyr se Poe-opera was 'n historiese gebeurtenis. *Musiek-Rapport*: 24, December 4.
- Heyneman, L. 1988. *Usher* is knap inheemse opera. *Vrye Weekblad*: December 2. (See appendix E: 5)
- Odendaal, T. 1988. 'n Gebeurtenis sonder die gala. *Beeld*: November 21. (See appendix E: 7)
- Odendaal, T. 1988. Om opera as opera te behou. *Beeld*: November 24. (See appendix E: 8)
- Smit, P. 1988. Hofmeyr achieves a lot with little. *The Star Tonight*: 4, November 28.
- Smith, B. 1988. Hofmeyr's horror lingers on. *Sunday Star*: November 27. (See appendix E: 9)
- Viljoen, H. 1988. Operageskiedenis in Staatsteater. *Transvaler Applous*: December 1. (See appendix E: 10)
- Van Rensburg, R. 1988. Opera's impact reverberates. *PTA News Tonight*: 16, November 28.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE WILLIAMS / STEPHENSON COLLABORATION

The Orphans of Qumbu

Première of Schools Tour

Director/Librettist Michael Williams
Composers Allan Stephenson / Michael Williams
Musical Director Allan Stephenson

Characters	Voice type	First Performance Cast
Sticks, a young teenager without parents	boy or girl soprano	Belinda Berman
Silas, an older man, a storyteller	baritone	Denver Smith
Sophia, a mystic healer	soprano	Christina Farr
Innkeeper, a pleasant, friendly woman	alto	Dale Wesson
Policeman, a handsome rogue	baritone	Jason Crook
Beadle, a corrupt minister	baritone/tenor	Ronnie Theys
Judge, a maudlin old man	bass	Kevin Derman
Farmer, the village idiot	non-singing	
Farmer's wife, the village tart	non-singing	
Beadle's wife, the village drunk	non-singing	
A chorus of between 15 – 40 "orphans"		

Original Orchestration

Piano and percussion (marimba, large gong, bass drum, African drums, congas, glockenspiel, suspended cymbals, bongos, shakers, tambourine, cowbell, vibraphone, metal chimes, rainstick, military drum, bell in D, claves, bamboo blocks)

Synopsis¹

Scene 1: The outskirts of the Qumbu valley

Three travellers make their way to the Qumbu Valley where they hope to find healing. Sophia, a visionary, leads the way hoping to find a cure for her illness in Qumbu. Silas is in search of a good story, and Sticks wants to find his parents. Sophia moves slowly and halts from time to time, but is then revitalized by a drink of water from a bottle in Sticks' basket.

Scene 2: Closer to Qumbu

They move on but Sticks forgets to take his basket with him. They encounter a group of children who are digging holes in the ground with pick-axes and spades. The children rest for a while, the girls dreaming of their parents' return and the boys ending up joining them in singing an anthem praising Okri and their ancestors. When the travellers return from fetching Sticks' basket, Sticks

¹ Synopsis condensed from programme notes, by kind permission of Michael Williams.

introduces himself, startling the children who collect their tools (including Sticks' basket), and run off.

Scene 3: The village of Qumbu

A festive atmosphere prevails as the leading citizens of Qumbu introduce themselves to the audience. The travellers interrupt the policeman's introduction, and he is then joined by the Townsfolk who welcome them heartily even though they are concerned about Sticks' enquiry regarding the children. The innkeeper invites them to stay the night.

Scene 4: The inn

The innkeeper goes out of her way to make the travellers feel at ease. She gives them a hot meal but notices that they are listening to the children's voices which can be heard in the distance. Meanwhile Sticks has decided to find the children and his basket.

Scene 5: Out of town

The orphans are preparing for bed when Sticks interrupts them. They crowd around him, but after he has set them at ease by explaining to them how he got his name – he was found in the basket, floating on a river - they accept him into their circle. He then feels at ease and begins to



One of the chorus scenes from *The Orphans of Qumbu*.

question them, but the policeman, the beadle and the judge arrive to lock up the children. Sticks however manages to escape with his basket and makes his way back to the Inn.

Scene 6: The inn

Sophia dreams about water from a natural spring in Qumbu that will cure her illness.

Scene 7: The inn

The travellers insist on finding out what has happened in Qumbu. They interrogate the innkeeper until she tells them about the parents of the children who were all killed in battle trying to preserve the sweet spring water that has subsequently dried up.

Scene 8: Qumbu village

The children march in, demanding to know what has happened to their parents. Sticks is the first to tell them what he has learnt, and as Sophia and Silas help to unravel the Qumbu secret, the children threaten to burn down the Inn. It is Sophia who saves the day by making them see a way of sharing the wealth and the healing water of Qumbu by showing that 'Healing has to come from within'. Sticks addresses the orphans, Silas and the townsfolk while Sophia divines a new source for the spring. They then celebrate their newly found peace.

Discussion of *The Orphans of Qumbu*

Qumbu was written to involve children in an opera production, and allows for an original composition to be inserted in the first scene. Karen Rutter explains:

The script calls for a large group of children to play the orphans of the title, a collection of 'lost souls' who according to the story, are forced to work in the fields of Qumbu by the townsfolk who live in the town. (sic) Apart from singing, their contribution consists of carefully choreographed ensemble work, which brings a lot of colour and action onto the stage, an effect which is nicely counter-balanced by the solo roles of the rest of the cast. (1997:F1)²

It is a sung-through show, similar to an opera where there is no spoken dialogue. The song, 'Digging Holes', is an exception because in it the children apply rhythmic speech in the popular music style known as 'rap'. The tale of three travellers finding children digging for the 'well of goodwill' is an allegory. Williams later based his novel, 'The Secret Song', on the libretto of the opera. Barry Ronge describes it the following way:

It is a wonderfully inventive music statement which creatively uses the best performance elements of both styles in a striking synthesis. His plot negotiates a similarly fine line between magic realism and political satire. (1993:F1)²

The opera is based on a universal story, but is specifically about the South African 'rainbow nation'. In the initial production, the principal characters were performed by singers from the

² See appendix F: 1

CAPAB Opera Cadet Programme (since replaced by the CTO Opera Studio), and the chorus comprised scholars from the schools where performances were held. The opera was taken on tour to schools around the Cape Peninsula, performing with a different chorus of scholars on each occasion. Rutter informs:

The score is bright and accessible, which is entirely appropriate to the participative nature of the production. As a means to expose audiences, particularly younger ones, to the often-intimidating genre of music-theatre, *The Orphans of Qumbu* succeeds completely. (1997:F1)

A noteworthy performance was held at the Artscape Opera House and included a large number of schools as part of Freedom Day celebrations. Additional school tours were organized, and as a result the opera has gained wide recognition. *Qumbu* has been performed throughout South Africa and as far afield as Botswana and Zimbabwe, and has been consistently cast in its entirety by scholars. Ronge (1993:F1) praises it as ‘a joyous affair, positive, creative and full of musical power, a significant signpost on the road ahead for music theatre in this country’.

The collaboration is the result of the efforts of three people - Linda Muller who wrote the percussion score, Michael Williams who wrote the lyrics and 80% of the tunes, and Allan Stephenson who completed the work by using his skills to refine, shape and word-paint. In *Qumbu* there are more traces of African elements than in any other of Stephenson’s works, and the folkloric component is ever-present together with his trademark, the use of minor sevenths. Stephenson has allocated a theme to each character; the policeman’s theme being rather comical since it has references to the inverted melody of *Die Stem*.

Apart from the added wind parts written for the ensemble at Table View High School, the instrumentation for *Qumbu*, like that of the other works, was conceived in non-symphonic terms, making the opera very portable. In addition, the backdrop may be reduced to a painted scene of a beautiful valley on cloth held up by poles. Props might include a cane basket, three weapons and a cloth to represent the stream.

In 1996 SUKOV'S Opera commissioned an Afrikaans translation that subsequently resulted in ten performances in the Orange Free State. It provided local singers and Afrikaans scholars with the opportunity of sharing a wonderful musical and theatrical experience.

Classification

The Orphans of Qumbu may be classified as a South African work because it is based on a South African story that includes a percussion ensemble as an accompaniment. This aspect of the work places it in an entirely different category from any of the works discussed thus far. Its rhythmic pulse places it well within the South African environment where no westernised orchestra is needed to support the singers.

Categorisation

Because *The Orphans of Qumbu* is a sung-through show, the action depends on the music to propel the drama forward. It is an opera that has serious dramatic moments (sung by trained soloists) that are complemented by the chorus of desperate orphans.

Who Killed Jimmy Valentine ?

A Musical Whodunnit by Michael Williams
 Première at the Baxter Theatre 7 September 1995
 Further performances until 16 September 1995

Director/Librettist Michael Williams
Composers Allan Stephenson / Michael Williams
Musical Director George Michie

Characters	Voice Type	First Performance Cast
Detective Jake Mulligan/Starlight Dancer Driven, smooth, intelligent Detective	baritone/tenor	Jean-Pierre van der Spuy
Jimmy Valentine Talented, charismatic, enigmatic singer	tenor	Keeno-Lee Hector
Darlene Valentine Timid, haunted	soprano	Loretta Engelbrecht
Ronnie Valentine Temperamental, bitter, ambitious	baritone	Alfred Wildebees
Jackie Hanekom Beautiful vamp, jealous, sassy	alto	Jolene Martin
Ben Tetwa Hard-working, honest, bitter	bass	Vuyani Buwe
Nomsi Tetwa Lovely, romantic, starry-eyed	soprano	Cecilia Goncalves
Scar Cool, shifty, loud mouth	bass	Basil Tshabalala
Sipho Tetwa/Sipho's Rapster Idealistic, younger brother	tenor	Mawethu Tsengiwe
Nkosinati Tetwa Oldest brother, angry young man	non-singing	Thokozani Manyange
Kate Edwards/Reporter/Starlight Dancer Determined, professional, sassy	non-singing	Ger-Marie van Rooyen
Policemen Efficient	non-singing	Mansoer Boltman, Conroy Cupido
Masters of Ceremony Gregarious, outrageous, showy	non-singing	Odidi Mfenyana, Granville Meyer, Thomalene Stevens
Spanish Dancers`		Jeanine Kroneberg, Shireen Diedericks
Sipho's Rapsters		Lebogang Sebesho, Marguerita Freeks, Galatia Goliath, Dennis Stander
Starlight Dancers		Ndoda Khalipha, Faiza Naude

Company: Adri Noble, Arlene Sasman, Cindy Gibbons, Phillip Jacobs, Priscilla Andries,
 Simoné Martufi, Susan Davis, Waleed Isaacs, Shereen Rewu, Fiona Bobbs

Original Orchestration

Piano, synthesizer, percussion, drum kit and electric bass

Synopsis²

ACT I

Jimmy Valentine is killed by seven shots on the streets of Cape Town. The community is stunned by the sudden act of violence and the Valentine choir are devastated to lose their talented choir leader. Kate Edwards, reporter extraordinaire, reports the story, while Detective Jack Mulligan arrives at the scene of the crime to stop a street brawl between the rivals, Ben Tetwa and Ronnie Valentine. Detective Mulligan vows to get to the bottom of the murder. His investigation begins with a visit from Darlene Valentine, Jimmy's mother, who recounts the events leading up to Jimmy's death at the time of The Atlantis Talent Contest.

A Tetwa taxi is set alight, and the start of the war between Valentine and Tetwa taxis overshadows Jimmy's impressive win at the talent contest. The same night Jimmy falls in love with Nomsa Tetwa and dumps his long-time girlfriend, Jackie. Nomsa too leaves her boyfriend, Scar, a one-time driver of her father's taxis.

Jake Mulligan interviews the two women in Jimmy's life, during which they recount how Jimmy formed the Valentine choir. Jackie explains how Jimmy betrayed her and says that Scar swore revenge on Nomsa. Jake discovers that Nomsa lied about the last time she saw Jimmy. Scar gives the detective a tip-off regarding the whereabouts of the murder weapon.

Jake Mulligan pays a visit to Ben Tetwa who, explaining the reason for the hatred between Ronnie Valentine and himself, reveals that Tetwa's youngest son, Siphos, was killed in a taxi shoot-out. Jake discovers the murder weapon in one of Tetwa's taxis and arrests him for the murder of Jimmy Valentine.

ACT II

The company travels by taxi to school and to work and is involved in a violent shoot-out. The community protests at the police station, demanding an end to the taxi war. Detective Jake Mulligan placates the crowd by announcing the arrest of Ben Tetwa. Kate Edwards reveals that it could not have been the seven shots that killed Jimmy Valentine because he was already dead before he was shot. Jake's case against Ben Tetwa collapses and he is forced to release his prime suspect. He interviews Scar and Ronnie Valentine. Jimmy's father admits to not understanding his son's way of life or his gift for music. He also admits to throwing Jimmy out of the house. Jake meets Nomsa Tetwa and forces her to tell the truth about the last time she saw Jimmy alive. She recounts how Jimmy told her that their relationship had to end, and that as they left the area, they had overheard Scar plotting with one of the drivers of the Tetwa taxis to kill Ronnie Valentine. Jimmy confronts Scar who escapes into the night. Jimmy leaves Nomsa to warn his father of the plot to kill him.

² Synopsis condensed from programme notes, by kind permission of Michael Williams.

Jake Mulligan cross-examines Darlene Valentine who admits that Jimmy had returned home the night he died. She tells Jake of the terrible fight between father and son - how Ronnie had attacked Jimmy and how Jimmy had hit his head and was knocked unconscious. She relates how Ronnie had dragged his son to the taxi and that she had then heard seven shots.

Mulligan calls the company together and unravels the murder: Ronnie was carrying his son to the taxi when Scar's attempt to assassinate Ronnie Valentine was thwarted by Jimmy shielding his father from the seven shots. Ronnie seized the opportunity to frame his rival and use his son's corpse to implicate Ben Tetwa. Jake arrests Scar for the murder of Jimmy Valentine and Ronnie for conspiracy.

Nomsi reconstitutes the choir to sing at the national competition in memory of their leader, Jimmy Valentine.

Discussion of *Who Killed Jimmy Valentine?*

The Volkswagen Musicactive Programme commissioned Michael Williams to write and direct a work for a cast of young performers (up to the age of twenty-two). The work requires both a large cast and soloists who are adept at singing and dancing. In this collaborative work, Williams wrote 30% of the tunes while Stephenson is credited with the other 70%. Stephenson scored the work for five instruments, permitting it to be performed by scholars and teachers. For the Camps Bay High School production he included wind, brass and string parts to accommodate the school orchestra. A fully orchestrated version was later presented at a benefit concert.

Similarly to *The Orphans of Qumbu*, it is a sung-through show with either the Valentine Choir as a permanent fixture or else making use of young people from the neighbourhood. There is ample opportunity for the choreographer to show off the step sequences, especially in production numbers such as the 'Prologue' and 'War at midnight'. Josh Cromhout observes:

The music, which uses a variety of established styles, is particularly catchy and I left humming some of the tunes from the show. Stephenson and Williams have blended the best traditions of musical theatre and created rousing ensembles, solo songs, two heart-breaking duets, and after a few minutes, one's ear adjusts to the fact that everything is sung from start to finish. (1999)

It is a story written for teenagers about a taxi-war with *Romeo & Juliet* elements. The feuding families are represented by two taxi gangs comprising the Valentine and Tetwa families. References to George Bernstein's *West Side Story*, especially at the beginning, and in most of the numbers that have an underlying Latin rhythm, are immediately recognisable. The ensemble number 'There's been a fire tonight' at the end of Act I, scene 3 involving six characters and the chorus, strongly resembles the 'Tonight' ensemble/Quintet from *West Side Story*. The use of melodic percussion forms an even stronger association with the Bernstein work.

The use of quotations or references to well-known works improves its accessibility to an audience. An example of this can be heard in Act I, scene 7, where a four-part rendition of a Negro spiritual 'Joshua fought the battle of Jerico' sung by Jimmy's choir at the competition, is inserted into the musical.

All the characters and their music are introduced in the first ten minutes of the musical. These themes are repeated throughout the work to create unity. The last minutes end with a hymn – ‘Grant him peace - And let eternal light forever shine upon him – Shake your soul !’. There is also, as in *Qumbu*, the advantage of an opportunity to include a number for (a) guest artist(s) in the Talent contest. Here Siphosiphos’s rapsters are allowed to make up their own ‘rap number’.

What makes the show portable is the fact that the set design can be simplified to include one backdrop of a city scene while furniture and props can be kept to a bare minimum. Slides and projections may be used effectively to augment the minimalist setting.

Williams and Stephenson are both attracted to detective themes, and which also appeal to youthful audiences who delight in the violent actions of the gangs and in the tender moments shared by young lovers. They have succeeded in producing a musical that appeals to an audience that is broader than those consisting of traditional opera-goers. Melvin Whitebooi enthuses:

Who killed Jimmy Valentine? is a wonderful musical full of vitality...racy, with pulsing rhythms – a show with soul. Cape Town loves this kind of musical – as *Poison* also proved – Jimmy Valentine should attract full houses. This musical is footloose and full of life, with pulsating rhythm and lights that remind strongly of the Cape Town nightclubs, but added to this, the piece has soul as well. (1995)

Classification

Who Killed Jimmy Valentine? may be classified as a South African work because, even though it is based on the universal *Romeo and Juliet* theme also found in *West Side Story*, it has successfully been translated as a South African story of Taxi-gang warfare. It was topical at the time but could eventually become a period piece. Apart from the theme and setting, its musical flavour tends towards American pop culture, which is a clear indication of its influence on urban youth in South Africa.

Categorisation

This work is difficult to categorise for the reasons given in the introduction to this study. Even though I would regard the work as a musical, the inclusion of recitative makes it more like an opera but more difficult to perform. While most critics have considered it to be a musical (a view substantiated by the extended dance sequences and its sheer entertainment value), it in fact fits the definition of opera as applied throughout, since the action is sustained by the music. It might become one of the works that anticipates a new, contemporary interpretation of opera as a genre.

Wonderfully Wicked

A Romantic Musical Comedy in two Acts

Music Allan Stephenson
Director / Libretto Michael Williams
Conductor Alexander Fokkens

Première at the Hottentots-Holland High School in collaboration with Cape Town Opera and Artscape, 21 July 2005, as part of the school's 75th anniversary celebrations.
 Further performances on 22 and 23 July 2005.

Characters	Voice Type	First Performance Cast
Twostep	tenor	Jantus Philaretou
Jessie	soprano	Mandy Henriques
Roxy	soprano	Nicolette Castelyn
Robert	baritone	Hannu Ehlers
B J Buckman	tenor	Cameron Grant
Alison Cooper, Biology Teacher	soprano	Kristie de Klerk
Rosalie Benton	soprano	Anne Walsh
Charles Boardman, Head of English	tenor	Bob Connell
Johan Claasen, Rugby Coach	bass	Ralph Rudd
Jasmina, the Tea Lady	alto	Bronwyn Peterson
Marvin Miller, Dance Instructor	baritone	Kyle Seconna
Ms Prickle, the Secretary	soprano	Lizelle Philander
Peter Baxter, the Principal	baritone	Basil Pattison-Bacon
Spaceman	tenor	excluded
Reporter	baritone	excluded
Swimmer	soprano	excluded
Ms Nancy Maxwell, Financial Advisor		Samantha Tunnah
Marlin		Horacio Williams
Sloane, School Superintendent		Steve Roux
Rugby Commentator		Wolhuter Theron
Jessie's friends		Tamara Pringiers
		Marike du Plooy
		Prudence Sopazi
		Caitlin Hudson
Roxy's friends		Larissa Pringiers
		Kari Quattroccere
		Roxanne du Preez
		Lauren Arendse
Robert's friends		Bradley Bennell
		Wolhuter Theron
		Sergei Pringiers
Buckman's friends		Duane van Wyk
		Warren Bennell
		Justin Waverley
Chorus of fifty pupils at the school		

Orchestration

Clarinet/Alto Saxophone

Trumpet

Trombone

Electric Bass

Kit Drum

Piano

Synopsis³**ACT I**

Twostep, a twenty-two-year-old ballroom dancer, wants to relive his 'Glory days' at Shady Side High School. Marvin, his camp dancing-instructor, assists Twostep in fitting on the school uniform, even though he has doubts about the enterprise. Marvin reminds him that he left school in Grade 11 - to dance! Twostep insists on wanting to re-enter school to pass the matriculation examination and while there to enjoy school social life.

Baxter, the principal, discusses his new 'fund-raising' idea with Nancy Maxwell, his 'financial consultant'. He plans to bet on the rugby team losing their match, while Johan Claasen, the rugby coach, is determined to win since the team has lost for seven years running. Alison Cooper, who has been working under cover, reports back to Superintendent Sloane that she has not discovered anything apart from the fact that the school is always short of money.

Twostep meets Ms Prickle who actually runs the school and she provides him with the enrolment documents. Nancy Maxwell enters, and Twostep has a sneaking suspicion that he has seen her somewhere before, possibly in Beaufort West, where he was known as Tertius Viljoen. He then literally bumps into Alison who is catching fruit flies for an experiment on sex, and finds himself falling in love with 'Miss Biology'. They later discover that they, in fact, do have feelings for each other.

On the playground Twostep meets Roxy, BJ, and Jessie as well as their 'satellites'. He is 'given the once-over'. The teachers enter and he is confronted by the coach who reminds him of the rugby practice that afternoon. At assembly Ms Maxwell is introduced, and she informs the school of the principal's scheme to turn their matric-dance fund of R30 000 into R90 000.

Twostep meets Jasmina who tells him about Alfred, the janitor, who never attends the matric dance. Coach Claasen asks Alison out on a date but she turns him down. Marvin now arrives to bring Twostep's lunch and ID document but embarrasses him in the process. Meanwhile the teachers, Charles and Rosalie, share a moment as they discuss the principal and their lunchtimes together.

Twostep is put through his paces at the rugby practice to see whether or not he is fly-half material, and he makes the team! Roxy confronts him about dancing and so he ends up teaching them the tango and the waltz. He and Alison end up together, and one thing leads to another until finally he gives her a kiss. Alison is bewildered and angry.

³ Synopsis condensed from musical score, by kind permission of Michael Williams.

ACT II

The 'big rugby match' between Shady Side and Excelsior High ensues, and Twostep saves the day by scoring four tries. Consequently Principal Baxter has lost his bet together with the dance funds. Ms Nancy Maxwell persuades him to make use of the pension funds to cover up the loss.

Twostep discovers the 'surveillance equipment' that coach Claasen had installed to listen in on Excelsior's strategy. Alison finds him and wonders why he is not celebrating with the rest of the team. They then talk, dance and embrace and as they passionately 'make-out', Claasen and Rob discover them. In the meantime Twostep phones Marvin and begs him to pose as his father.

The pupils get to hear the 'hot' news and Jessie breaks the sad news about the cancelled matric dance. Ms Prickle breaks even sadder news to a disgruntled Charles Boardman who has been told-off by Rosalie because the pension funds have disappeared, and fingers are pointing at Ms Maxwell. Charles tries to comfort Rosalie by offering her some lunch, but she has given up hoping that there might be a romance and, having lost her pension as well, decides to leave.

Jasmina is upset about the dance, hoping to have met Alfred this time around. She tells Twostep that his 'mother' is with Mr Baxter. Marvin charms Baxter and they even dance the tango but Twostep is more concerned about Alison's job. Jasmina advises Twostep to stop fooling himself and to embrace his Glory days that lie ahead of him, not those behind him in the past.

Alison reflects on her 'foolish heart' and reports back to Sloane. Twostep finds her and his confession distresses her even more. The enraged teachers and students demonstrate. They learn that Twostep is not a bona-fide pupil and that Claasen cheated by using 'technology' to eavesdrop. Sloane dismisses Baxter and Claasen and declares that since Twostep is not a pupil, Alison is no longer in trouble. Ms Prickle suggests that the results of the match are invalid and that if they are able to hack into Ms Maxwell's computer program, they can reverse the transfer of funds.

The rugby team are without a coach and Twostep recommends his old Beaufort coach, Marvelous Marvin for the job! Jessie announces that the dance is on once more and the theme is to be 'Moulin Rouge Remix'. The highlight is when the rugby team dance the tango. Now Charles declares his love for Rosalie and Alison decides to dance with Twostep. Jasmina appears but only Twostep can see her. The crowd breaks the news that she had died many years ago and that Alfred had died at a matric dance after falling from a ladder.

The company celebrate with a grand Finale.

Discussion of *Wonderfully Wicked*

This is a musical with dialogue and is of special significance to Hottentots Holland High School because Michael Williams, a past scholar, was commissioned to write it for the school's 75th anniversary celebrations. The story is topical and the style contemporary. The staging allows for two choruses in the body of the hall as well as for one on stage for scenes involving the full company, such as the start of Act II where the boys act out a rugby match on stage with

spectators and a commentator nearby. The two choruses represent the two opposing schools cheering from different sides of the auditorium.

Wonderfully Wicked adheres to the 'musical' structure by including solos, duets, choruses, and even a 'Rugby Cantata' at the beginning of Act II. 'Action on the field' is set to music and inventive choreography makes this one of the most splendid production numbers of the show.

Other highlights include the following: Alison's 'Foolish Heart' solo at the 11th hour of the musical, when the teacher reflects on having fallen in love with a scholar; the hilarious visit that Twostep's 'mother' pays the principal; the 'Can we be sure this is love?' duets; Jasmina the ghost's experiences and the 'Moulin Rouge Remix' – Matric Dance Finale. What counts in the work's favour is the fact that everyone can identify with the school scenario since every school has a Tea-Lady, Ghost, Nerd, etc. What elevates this production, however, is a well-constructed script and a slick presentation, given the limitations of a school hall. Even though the director cut a considerable portion of the original script during rehearsals, it can still do with more editing. The 'Catching Flies' duet should go, since it is merely a trifle and therefore seems out of place, along with a few 'Glory Days' reprises. Generally the first half needs trimming.

The musical has some of the flavour of the film *Moulin-Rouge*, and is especially noticeable where there are quotes from up-to-date pop songs. It is scored for a Jazz combo, and accordingly it goes without saying that the idiom is jazzy and includes much dance music, the more so since the storyline has a rugby player who aims to follow a ballroom dancing career. The score contains some lovely lyrical themes in the vocal lines that are answered effectively in the wind parts. Stephenson shows just how versatile he can be in writing and scoring for this genre.

Classification

Wonderfully Wicked may be classified as a South African work because it depicts for a cross-section of the community school life at a typical South African school. In the plot everyday issues are addressed that would appeal to the average South African citizen.

Categorisation

This work is a musical because of the nature of the dialogue, the pop-orientated musical numbers and the emphasis on dancing.

The following reviews may be found in Appendix F :

The Orphans of Qumbu

Ronge, B. 1993. A musical signpost. Sunday Times: July 3. (electronic access: 3 Musicals for young people CDROM, Oxford University Press)

Rutter, K. 1997. Stimulating schools tour opera. *The Cape Times*: March 1997. (electronic access: 3 Musicals for young people CDROM, Oxford University Press)

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Who Killed Jimmy Valentine?

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CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY AND TABLE OF ANALYSIS: NEW WORKS

In this final chapter the commonalities and/or differences found in the works that were analysed are highlighted, thereby defining opera in South Africa during the democratic era of 1994 - 2004.

For the sake of clarity I have tabled the data (see figure 1.), clearly indicating works that belong together with regard to theme, social issues, assimilated material, multi-cultural style and use of recurring material such as a leitmotiv.

Original works written and/or performed between 1994 – 2004.

(1) The works indicated by * in the table have a South African theme. These works were written by composers resident in the country but not necessarily of South African descent. The opening paragraph of the introduction states my position on this quite clearly, namely that works may be regarded as South African if they include assimilated indigenous ethnic elements by way of dance, music and language. Only three of the operas (*Amarantha*, *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *The Land of Heart's Desire*) cannot be classified as South African according to this definition.

Composers of the collaborative works cannot take credit for having written an opera because their contribution is partial, having either only provided melody lines (Khumalo and Williams) or a portion of the material of an unfinished work (Koapeng and Phipps). After having contributed valuable original material, Khumalo did not complete the process because the skills needed to generate dramatic links and an orchestral fabric were lacking. Koapeng and Phipps could not complete *earthdiving* in the limited allotted time, the result being that it had to be handed over to a composer who could write prolifically under pressure. Williams on the other hand is a librettist who initiated the work by providing the script and suggestions for a percentage of the melodies. The market therefore tends to be product-orientated as opposed to process-orientated. The latter is preferable since it allows sufficient time for a work to mature before it reaches an acceptable artistic level.

(2) The works indicated by + in the table reflect a sense of identity, albeit in terms of racial separatism, but are nonetheless works that address human rights or social issues. All the works indicated, excepting *Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu*, deal with the sensitive land ownership issue that has been a point of discussion in recent years. *Valley Song* does not strive to be a propaganda piece but the rest do. The original works may be regarded as successful in their own right for reasons dealt with in each chapter, but do not reflect the true spirit of the democratic era. The themes or settings chosen for certain of the Africanised operas (Beethoven's *Fidelio* for example) on the other hand are more relevant to the South African situation because freedom is the keyword in such instances.

The composers whom I was fortunate to have interviewed were unaware of post-colonial theories, and their work makes no attempt at tackling sensitive issues such as transmigration,

transitional situations and other issues. The composers were presented with a script and then proceeded (given the limited time to complete a commission) to utilise the more established traditional styles in their writing. There was no attempt at being revolutionary. In the case of white composers, their background and intentions in writing opera were far removed from ideologies underlying events such as the Soweto-uprising. As far as Khumalo and Koapeng are concerned, however, the reason for not reflecting political ideology is more difficult to ascertain. *Enoch, Prophet of God* is the only work that touches on sensitive issues by reflecting the fear of the British settlers and the anger of the suppressed Zionists. The librettists were more attuned to finding material from the historic past or themes from urban legend, but which then tend to date works from this period. The themes of war and bloodshed serve as social commentary for the past and act as salutary warnings, but do not reflect the current situation in South Africa since the transfer of power from the National party to the ANC occurred peacefully.

Four of the original works (*Valley Song, Enoch, Prophet of God, Buchuland* and *The Orphans of Qumbu*) reflect a sense of identity associated with belonging to the land. Its repossession becomes an obsession with those concerned, but this is an archaic notion where progress and flexibility are forsaken for reliance on the soil and external influences. Maybe it is still opportune to deal with the stories of the unforgiven past in this era of peace and reconciliation. Once South Africans have come to terms with the deeply subconscious nature of opera, writers and composers will emerge to tell stories of unbounded and mobile, modern South Africans in their cross-cultural spheres in the global village.

(3) Quotations in the form of arias from operas, songs, chorale tunes, hymns, warrior dances and African choral settings are freely used in all the operas except for *Sacred Bones, Lumukanda* and *The Land of Heart's Desire*. These assimilations are included to remind the audience of their cultural heritage, for example as a parody in the case of the Post Office scene in *Valley Song*, or merely to date pieces according to a given period.

The use of quotation is a way of retaining a notion of cultural heritage or remembering historic events. In many of the original works ritual dances and choral harmonisations of hymns and songs have emerged to make some or other connection with the event being portrayed. Composers of serious works (Mahler, for example) have used quotations taken from other classical pieces for incorporation in their own symphonies, thus presenting a work within a work – a kind of parallelism in fact. A parallel in theatre, for instance, would be a 'play within a play'. My position on this topic is that composers have not integrated these quotations carefully enough to render them feasible on any stylistic level. The frequently contrived use of these assimilations functions as audience-accessible items, the songs always being in the home language of the target audience.

(4) All the works except for *The Fall of the House of Usher* suggest attempts at a hybridised style of presenting musical material. Cross-cultural idioms are employed in both the instrumental writing and the vocal lines to present a modernist approach to operatic writing in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Operas that display a merging of contrasting styles are generally of the folk opera variety. The Jazz element is readily sought as a point of departure because of its modern harmonic system and

expressiveness which blends well with styles such as Temmingh's 'untonality' and percussiveness that are reminiscent of rituals and dance in ethnic music. Composers of works reliant on Western systems fail to make the appropriate connections when using divergent material. I suspect that these structures are not flexible enough to allow a shift towards the transcultural nature required of works in a post-colonial framework.

A recent production of the ragtime opera *Treemonisha* demonstrated that affective simplicity was sufficiently ample to convey and satisfy the demands of a folk opera theme. Whereas Scott Joplin only wrote ragtime, it can be said of South African composers that they have attempted to write in an eclectic style, thus portraying the diversity and tolerance within South African cultures.

(5) Rajna, Temmingh, Hofmeyr, van Dijk (*earthdiving*) and Stephenson (*Who Killed Jimmy Valentine?*) make use of the technique of recurring motifs which serves to unify the work as well as provide links with the drama. It is used in a way similar to that employed by Wagner when themes are assigned to characters or situations, and then when there is no connection to a character or situation they merely function as recurrent or reminiscent themes. The practice of using unifying themes in compositions that disappeared in western art music during the Neo-classical period has once again become a popular and valuable compositional method for writing opera.

Figure 1: Table of analysis.

Opera/Composer	Nationality	1. Theme	2. Identity/issues presented by opera	3. Quotations or assimilations	4. Multi-cultural styles	5. Recurring motifs
AMARANTHA T Rajna	Hungarian	American	Obsession and change.	Square dance rhythm and folk tunes.	Folk tunes suggest Eng. and American styles.	Recurring themes.
VALLEY SONG T Rajna	Hungarian	South African	Land-ownership and change	Parody, hymn tunes, popular tunes.	Eclectic style : Western to Township, gospel, etc.	Themes recur throughout.
ENOCH, PROPHET OF GOD R Temmingh	Dutch	South African	Struggle for possession of land.	African choral singing and dancing.	African choral harmony and Western.	None
SACRED BONES R Temmingh	Dutch	South African	Fear of losing land. Sexual and cultural tensions.	No citation.	African rhythms.	None
BUCHULAND R Temmingh	Dutch	South African	Re-possession of land and love. Peace process in SA.	Afrikaans children's songs and a hymntune.	Folk-operatic style, Jazz and Western.	Kolgat theme is repeated.
LOVE & GREEN ONIONS D Weale M Williams	South African South African	South African	Violence and hardship of township life.	English hymns.	Jazz, Western operatic and choral.	Each character is identified by a tonerow.
PRINCESS MAGOGO KADINUZULU M Khumalo M Williams Hankinson	South African South African British	South African	Preservation of Zulu heritage. Symbol of Zulu nationalism.	Songs written by the Princess, warrior dances and praise singing.	Zulu melodies with Western orchestration.	None
earthdiving PL van Dijk M Phipps M Koapeng	Dutch British South African	South African	Peace and reconciliation Introspection and self-healing	African rhythms, chants and dances.	Links that suggest Stravinskian rhythms.	Use of repetition and leitmotiv for unity.
THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER H Hofmeyr	South African	English	Gothic horror melodrama.	Use of 'Dies Irae' theme and Hofmeyr's 'Sick Rose'	None	Use of leitmotiv.
LUMUKANDA H Hofmeyr	South African	South African	African mythological and historical theme.	No citation.	West African generic rhythms.	Leitmotiv and recurring octotonic motifs.
THE LAND OF HEART'S DESIRE H Hofmeyr	South African	Irish	Superstition	No citation.	English and Irish folk music.	Reminiscent motifs.
DIE LAASTE AAND H Hofmeyr	South African	South African	Political intrigue.	Finale based on 1st var. of 2nd mov. Piano conc.	Pastiche of Cape Malay songs.	Reminiscent motifs.
THE ORPHANS OF QUMBU A Stephenson M Williams	British South African	South African	Re-ownership of land and water.	Inverted theme of <i>Die Stern</i> .	Folk with African percussion elements.	None
WHO KILLED JIMMY VALENTINE A Stephenson M Williams	British South African	South African	Taxi-gang warfare.	Negro Spiritual, hymn and rap number.	Latin rhythms.	Each character is given a theme which becomes a recurring motif.
WONDERFULLY WICKED A Stephenson M Williams	British South African	South African	School life.	Moulin-Rouge Remix.	American pop culture.	None

CONCLUSION

The investigation of operas written in South Africa during the previous decade has demonstrated that these works are not all based on local themes. Neither do they all contain ethnic musical elements that are assimilated into the fabric of the musical material. Even when the storyline is indigenous, the music often displays a preponderance of western elements. In my opinion, future large-scale works that deserve the right to be categorised as South African operas should, as far as the major part of the work is concerned, be composed and orchestrated entirely in an indigenous musical idiom. The greatest flaw in both *Enoch, Prophet of God* and *Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu*, is that the music does not adhere to any particular South African indigenous style. South African composers have attempted to write in a 'traditional' style but have either not been challenged by the idea or had any intentions of creating a new musical synthesis.

A number of the composers interviewed labelled their individual styles uniquely as *contemporary lyricism* (Rajna), *expressivity* (Hofmeyr), and *untonal* (Temmingh). Even though the harmonic idiom might sound strange to a newly weaned or even a regular opera audience, it is the method by which they employ and integrate the various elements into a meaningful and relevant structure that is of significance. Arnold Whittal in Grove Music Online states:

If, as seems conceivable, music in the 21st century pursues a kind of classicism that attempts to integrate elements that 20th-century modernism sought to keep separate, then opera is no less likely to benefit from the development than other traditional genres which, despite all the odds, have survived the great 20th-century experiment. (ed Macey 2006)

In my opinion Hendrik Hofmeyr and Roelof Temmingh are the only composers who have written with '21st century classicism' in mind. Their style is suited to the more serious 'art music' nature of contemporary works based on the model of 'classical' composers rather than on those with popular appeal. In Sutcliffe's view:

Composers who should have the skills and inclination to write operas for today's audiences seldom provide what audiences want to hear. The dreams they have are too challenging. The sounds they want do not support an exchange of words between singer and audience. (1996:417)

Yet it is in the exchange that takes place between audiences and works regarding their presentation or interpretation, that such audiences can make value judgements about the quality of a composition. David Coplan (2002:11) states:

In the end, although music, like culture, is located most fundamentally at the level of individual psychology and the emotions, it is its social qualities and capacity to represent the social and cultural self that loom largest in the research agenda of an anthropology of music. What is performance after all? According to the renowned American folklorist Richard Bauman, performance is the taking of responsibility for a display of communicative competence before an audience (Bauman 1977:21).

In the reviews of original works we often find references to influences by composers such as Stravinsky, Bartok, Menotti, Britten and others. Unintentional 'borrowing' can be heard in countless works. Britten, however, seems to be a favourite model dating from the post-war

period. His stylistic influence was noticed by a number of different reviewers as they commented on the composition style of the works discussed in Chapters One, Two and Four. I also found that certain intervals, harmonic textures and style of orchestration are elements that are easily recognizable. Some compositions rely heavily on Stravinsky's pulsating, driving rhythms to create conflict and tension in the music, with *Enoch, Prophet of God* and *earthdiving* being prime examples.

By incorporating quotations from known works or the folk repertoire, as discussed in chapter six, composers are able to reconcile their audience to the unfamiliar sonic nature of 20th and 21st century tonality. Dyl Bonner explains:

To take a close analogy... if the expression of the idea entails the use of those words common to English and German (Hand, Man(n) etc.), the Englishman will understand something of the general meaning of the German prose. In the same way a composer working with familiar ready-made material establishes an immediate link with a wide audience, whose basic musical taste is essentially retrogressive...snippets of quotation in Cage's *Hpschd* and Stockhausen's *Hymnen* provide reassurance on the form of tiny islands of familiarity which anchor the listener in the unfamiliarity of the surrounding material like a bus ticket in a surrealist painting. For the composer they provide a means of achieving clearly defined contrast within the sometimes apparently aimless meanderings of total atonality. (1975:30)

Opera, like all music genres, consists of a macro- and a micro-form. Smith quotes Peter Warlock:

...it is certainly one of the most beautiful works (Cecil Gray's opera *Deidre*) that has been made in this country during the present century. But why do people write operas? There is no rotter form in which to cast good music, nor one that so militates against the music's chance of being heard. (2001:359)

Certain 'operas' were not successful because the overall shape of the work could not be visualised at its inception while others failed because of divided artistic input. Opera, as with any good story, needs a climax, a setting and a theme that holds the listeners' attention by the unfolding of developing subplots. Frank Barker emphasises:

Music, and operatic music in particular, depends to a large extent for its success on evoking some emotional response from its audience. In the opera house we become involved with the characters on stage, heroes and heroines as diverse in nature as Poppea, Donna Anna, the whole gallery of Leonoras, Elektra, Tristan, Wozzeck, Tom Rakewell and Peter Grimes. If we do not experience this dramatic involvement with the characters of opera and their dramatic predicaments, we can spend our time more profitably in the concert hall listening to works that have tensions and allurements of a different, more purely musical, kind. (1974:45)

Good librettists share in the responsibility of creating successful opera by producing a well-crafted script. They ignite the process of inspiration, they themselves having received stimuli from another source. It is often the piece with the most intriguing, yet uncomplicated text, which makes an eternal impression in the mind of the discerning viewer. In itself, the libretto cannot guarantee a 'best seller' but could assist the audience in coping with music that might be considered intellectual or difficult.

A subsequent production which premièred at the Artscape Theatre on 28 October 2005 was Hans Huyssen's *The Masque*. It demonstrated how the music of quite contrasting cultures is able to rise simultaneously from the same orchestra pit. Even though reviewers have commented that the

styles cohabit the same space without any attempt at integration, I am of the opinion that Huyssen's new hybrid (consisting of Classical, African and Baroque styles) creates an overall blend as far as timbre is concerned. The use of the marimba, uhadi, mbira and the kudu horn, together with ancient Baroque instruments in a conventional orchestral context (with written-out parts) is a step forward in providing a mixed palette of instrumental timbres. There is a strong connection instrumentally as well as harmonically if one takes into consideration the fact that indigenous music was colonised by Western influences in Africa.¹ Fiona Chisholm quotes Huyssen:

The moment Fikile sang with the uhadi,² everything changed. He has been encouraging others to take the risk and not to be Western-trained opera singers. They have their operatic training but they also have their traditions which they should cherish and translate into a contemporary realm appropriate for a modern audience. (2005:3)



The chorus of the *Fidelio* production on Robben Eiland in 2004.

¹ The theme of the opera (based on *The Origin of Life and Death – African Creation Myths*) revolves around four African masks (The Blind one, the Tired one, the Sad one and Death) placed in a museum that are viewed differently by Western and African people. These masks represent blindness, sleep, sorrow and death, balancing forces sent by God to cure man of his pride. To the Griot (a Mali storyteller) these masks have an emotional attachment and by touching them he brings them to life, thus dispelling the curse that made them lifeless.

² Uhadi – a traditional Xhosa bow with calabash as a resonating gourd. It is hit with a stick.

Fikile - Fikile Mvinjelwa is the singer who sang the role of the Griot.

Sutcliffe (1996:47) says that 'Theatre is about disturbing as well as pleasing – theatre including opera is a social escape valve for politics and philosophy'

Community projects and productions in stadiums add a different dimension to performances. Verdi's *Aida* was performed in a stadium and recently Beethoven's *Fidelio* was staged on Robben Island to commemorate ten years of democracy in South Africa. The location made the production even more relevant. Modernised and localized productions of 'old favourites' such as Opera Africa's *Magic Flute* by Mozart and Bizet's *Carmen* on film (*uCarmen eKhayelitsha*) or video/DVD, serve to locate the language of opera in a framework that is more easily accessible to the masses. When understood, the medium provides a means for identity and the recognition of self.

Broadcasts on national television brought these works into the homes and temporary shelters of many people who have never seen the inside of a theatre. Chisholm (2004:19) reports that 'Suddenly ANC members and government officials, who wouldn't normally be seen dead at an opera, found themselves bowled over by *Fidelio*'s awesome 80-strong Prisoner's Chorus'. It has been said that theatre is 'central to people's notion of their identity and their struggle for rights – emotional truth and freedom' (Peter Sellars). This statement is applicable to Africa and in particular to South Africa where people find security in their traditions, cultural heritage or via nostalgia. Through the medium of song and dance they are able to express their emotions and viewpoints. Amilcar Cabral (n.d.) makes the following relevant point:

A people who free themselves from foreign domination will be free culturally only if, without complexes and without underestimating the importance of positive accretions from the oppressor and other cultures, they return to the upward paths of their own culture, which is nourished by the living reality of its environment, and which negates both harmful influences and any kind of subjection to foreign culture.
(National Liberation and Culture)

This brings me to a controversial statement made by the minister of Arts and Culture, Pallo Jordan. He is quoted by Celean Jacobson (2005:39) as saying that 'African singers should not be trained to sing like their Italian counterparts'. Is the minister implying that there is no place for traditional opera in South Africa, or is he saying that we should be encouraging a new genre of folk opera? Commenting on *uCarmen eKhayelitsha* he expressed that 'there is no need to borrow from Bizet – there are many tragic tales to tell in Khayelitsha' (Jacobson 2005:39). The sad fact is that South Africa has not, to date, produced an opera composer who can measure up to the stature of Bizet. Moreover, the theme of the opera is universal, and speaks directly to the audience at whom it is directed.

Jordan's statement reflects the contents of a document prepared for the ANC's national general council which includes the idea that 'the national question is the quest for a single, united South African nation with a common, overriding identity' (Jacobson 2005:39/40).

The minister's statement elicited varying responses, one of them drawing a comparison between opera and international soccer, arguing that if it is acceptable for Africans to play a eurocentric sport, then Verdi should not be taboo. Surely this is a good argument for South African singers to train in those traditional styles that eventually prepare them for the international market. Another point of view is that opera is merely another style of singing as are kwaito, jazz or rap, implying that singers should have a choice of performing in one or more styles of singing. What is of

importance here is that opera is highly relevant in an economic sense, presently filling vacancies in the labour market. If one considers the foothold that the far-Eastern countries have gained in the international market then it is vital that we give South African singers the same opportunity. The previous minister of labour thought it wise to do so.

The Department of Labour and its official, Julian Jacobs, set in motion their self-fulfilling prophecy in 1997 when they earmarked R300 000 to train a group of 26 black opera singers. These young people were included in a pilot project, namely Hal Shaper's production of *La Bohème: Noir*. Julian Jacobs is reported as saying:

The agreement between the Department of Labour and CAPAB is 'an historic milestone'. It is the first time that the Department of Labour has focussed on the training and development of artists, expanding it's definition of 'workers' to include musicians, singers, performers and other arts-related professions. (Laura Twiggs 1997: 7)

In the end nothing can be accomplished without sufficient funding and support. After the dismissal of the Arts Councils and the budget cuts (15 – 30%) of 1996/97, Kenneth Marcus made the following report:

A White Paper has made it clear that the emphasis is to be on developing the artist and not the art form while guaranteeing funds for theatre complexes and services. The rechanneling of funding will leave arts organisations not used to fending for themselves seriously disadvantaged. The White Paper also makes it clear that the private sector must take on funding responsibilities. (1996 :8)



The cast of Hal Shaper's production of *La Bohème : Noir* in 1998.

The role of the audience is transformed where the patron is seen as a consumer:

Musicians, artists and arts organisations cannot guarantee the future of the performing arts. While it is the duty of the state to provide an infrastructure within which the arts can develop and prosper, it is also up to every single citizen to do their share.

Despite the attempts by government and the private sector in the past, no financial incentive was provided by the minister of culture in the commissioning of a new local product. Performances from the Romantic operatic repertoire, in particular the 'Africanised' *Carmen*, have enjoyed funding from various sources due to the efforts of the Spier Art Foundation. These works have generated a love for opera by fostering the urge to inspire the writing of new works. Thomas Rajna and Hendrik Hofmeyr have taken the risk of composing new works without any definite commitment received for the staging of a performance because, apart from their love for and faith in the genre, they wish to encourage young composers to preserve the genre for future generations.

If one looks at the sheer volume of works written since 1994, it is astounding to see what has been produced, given the financial, political and sociological constraints.

Amongst the original works studied in this undertaking there may be no masterpiece, but they expose the inadequacy of a period during which the nation is still seeking to establish its identity, and receiving no encouragement or financial support from a state that is unwilling to encourage black artists to acknowledge the genre as part of their culture. In more favourable times the ideal benchmark could be reached if the issues that have been examined are addressed. With rewrites and second performance runs, some of the works discussed in this dissertation might survive if they have artistic merit.

I express the hope that works displaying a promise equal to that achieved by Huyssen's *Masque* will emerge to herald a new period of South African Opera.

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APPENDICES A-G

OF

DISSERTATION

Opera in South Africa during the first democratic decade

Ivan Meredith
August 2006

APPENDIX A

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LIBRETTIST'S NOTES *Shaper*

The first performance of *La Bohème* was on 1 February 1896 at the Teatro Regio in Turin, Italy. Early in 1994, with the opera's approaching 100th Anniversary two years away, I began focusing my attention on *La Bohème*, but the basis for a relevant adaptation only crystallised in my mind in October 1995.

Bohemia, according to its creator Henri Murger, was a 'state of mind'. *La Bohème* was set in the Paris of 1830, against the background of the same revolution so compellingly portrayed in *Les Misérables*.

La Bohème: Noir parallels the political censorship, repression and violence of the Apartheid years. South Africa had become not so much a state of mind, as a State of Mindlessness; of everyday cruelty, poverty and despair. This *La Bohème* is set in Johannesburg on Republic Day, 31 May 1976, two weeks before the Children's Uprising of 16 June and the savage aftermath, in which Hector Petersen was the first to die.

The Revolution had become the seething focus of African Nationalism. The social side of the shebeens in Soweto mirrored exactly the café life of Paris; poverty was endemic and crime rampant. There was no heating or comfort from the cold and a squatter in the middle of Johannesburg had a precarious roof over his head. The shebeens provided a welcome alternative to the daily humiliations. In places like the Café Mama (as in the Café Momus) conversation flourished, plans were made, art and philosophy thrived and, as in the original *La Bohème*, the frantic gaiety, drinking, misery, and the realities of love, and sudden and wasteful death, were set against a background of grinding and relentless repression.

These were the parallels I saw. This is the background, to what I have written.

In October 1995 when I saw Willem Vogel's SABC TV *Debut* programme featuring Sibongile Mngoma singing an aria from *La Bohème*, it sparked off the entire train of events. As good fortune would have it, she is now playing the part she inspired. I asked Michael Williams to direct the piece, having seen and greatly admired his exemplary work on *Amahl and the Night Visitors* and his brilliantly original opera *Enoch, Prophet of God*.

Angelo Gobbato decided we should 'have a look at it' and on 26 August 1996 I went to the first rehearsal of Act One, and met many of the present cast. They have contributed continually to the language and spirit of this opera, as I hoped they would. The reception of Act One, last September, was sufficiently encouraging, for us to embark on this full-scale production.

If I record special thanks to the Minister of Labour, Mr Tito Mboweni, and Mr Brian Williams, Provincial Director of the Department of Labour Western Cape, it is in recognition of the simple fact that their vision and initiative made this project possible.

La Bohème: Noir... this *Black Bohème*, is dedicated to the memory of Hector Petersen and all who died for the precious freedoms we now enjoy.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES *Williams*

When Hal Shaper approached me with his idea for *La Bohème: Noir* I was struck by the inherent good sense of the concept. He made all the connections between Bohemian Paris and the revolutionary Johannesburg of the Seventies; he had kept the love story of Mimi and Rodolfo intact, but Mimi's death had now taken on a new and terrible poignancy. Of course the idea was also perfect material for the singers who have emerged from the Choral Training Programme.

With *Enoch, Prophet of God* the CTP sang a South African story, in a new African opera, but now they approach an opera that is well known and loved around the world. With Shaper's adaptation of *La Bohème* our singers have been given an opportunity to tackle a world-class opera, with a twist. Aside from stretching the singers vocally, the adaptation adds a new dimension to our interpretation of the opera.

DESIGNER'S NOTES *Mitchell*

The challenge as I saw it was to retain the essentially romantic feel of *La Bohème* in the face of the dramatic shift brought about by Shaper's rewriting of the libretto.

It is hard to imagine a greater contrast than that between Paris on Christmas Eve in the mid-Nineteenth Century and the seething black township of Soweto on the eve of the 1976 riots.

It struck me that all our memories of that turbulent time were in the black and white images of the press photographers.

It was in that same year that South Africa saw its first television broadcasts, but only the privileged few saw them and the shocking pictures that were seen abroad were never screened locally. I have tried to retain the feel and texture of those images as we knew them.

LIGHTING DESIGNER'S NOTES *ll*

The realities of township life in the Seventies can only be caricatured in this art form. The black and white documentation of the times needs no more than a third dimension on the stage. We are given licence at times to romanticise and this we do in both lighting and staging. I hope the spirit and soul of the period are captured in the unpretentious extraction of the harsh contrasts of that never-to-be-forgotten period of South African history.

NICO OPERA HOUSE
CAPE TOWN

17 - 30 DECEMBER 1997

LA BOHÈME NOIR

Reviewed by Julius Eichbaum

Unlike the painter or sculptor, the creative process of the composer/writer/choreographer cannot end in a few simple brush strokes or taps of the hammer. Instead, these creative artists are dependent upon the talents of others to bring their creative efforts to fruition.

This simple fact is one that is so often forgotten or deliberately overlooked by those who seek to formulate a new arts policy for South Africa.

For great music or drama or dance to materialize on our stages, requires the input of an entire and costly infrastructure. In an attempt to "rationalise" the spending of public money on the arts, these very necessary infrastructures which have hitherto mounted opera and ballet productions or which have operated symphony orchestras have been severely weakened. Within the next two years these bodies will find their survival to be virtually impossible given the reallocation of public funding to other less important areas such as the funding of arts and crafts as well as writers, poets, painters and sculptors who do not need the same costly infrastructures required by their counterparts in the performing arts field. In light of this clearly discernable future scenario, performing arts organisations have been bending over backwards in order to prove to the authorities that art forms such as opera and ballet do, indeed, have relevance to life in the new South Africa and are not merely to be regarded as highly expensive, elitist art forms more at home in Europe than they are in Africa. Therefore, for opera to survive in the new South Africa it has been felt incumbent in certain quarters that opera managements should to try and prove the relevance of opera in our new society and, accordingly, we have witnessed many attempts in the past to "Africanise" the art form, setting operas such as *Carmen*, *The Magic Flute*, and now Puccini's *La Bohème* in a "traditional" African setting.

Although this policy has been carried out with varying degrees of success and despite the fact that I am as ready as the next person to welcome inventive new stagings of operas created in a different time frame to that of our own, I find no valid reason to have to constantly walk the shoddy and often dishonest road of political correctness in order to prove to politicians and state officials the relevance to contemporary South African society of any great work of art which has achieved recognition throughout the world.

The latest offering in this "Africanisation" process, namely Cape Town Opera's *La Bohème Noir*, is certainly no exception. In the first instance I find the racial bias involved, distinctly questionable, particularly in view of the new political age in which we in South Africa find ourselves in. Firstly, I must look askance at the double standards which apply.

Can anyone one imagine the outcry that would have ensued if anyone had dared to stage a *La Bohème Blanc*? A "whites only" production is, in essence, morally no different than a "blacks only" production and if one cannot justify the one, I fail to see how one can possibly justify the other.

Certainly, if opera is not to become little more than an irrelevant 19th century museum piece, productions need to be updated and, where possible, under the guidance of a talented director, made relevant to the times in which we live. Johnathan Miller's famous English National Opera production of *Rigoletto* is but one example which readily springs to mind.

Yet despite this, I remain unconvinced that Hal Shafer's adaptation of Puccini's masterpiece and his decision to set the action of the opera in Soweto in 1976, with the township riots of the period as backdrop to the action, is any improvement over the original 1830 setting of the Bohemian quarter of Paris. In fact, Puccini's music and the libretto by Giacosa and Illica so vividly depict the characters - each one more perfectly and completely drawn than any other characters within a Puccini opera - that one is taking a real risk in altering either the setting or the period without a tangible justification, and only then if one has thought the entire concept through from beginning to end. The major flaw with Shafer's concept is that it has not been thought through. Although the production is clearly set in a South African black township where poverty is as discernable as in the Bohemian world of Puccini's original work, one is barely aware of the Soweto riots taking place. Hence, the superimposition of a "political message" remains, for all intents and purposes, pointless - except as an exercise in political correctness. By all means, one can change the setting from Paris to Soweto, but why superimpose a political agenda over a story which revolves around the human conditions of love, loyalty and friendship?

Shafer's adapted English libretto worked well enough but on occasion proved to be very much more cumbersome to sing than the Italian original.

Michael Williams directed Shafer's adaptation with poise and style and very sensibly concentrated on the human aspects of the drama rather than on Shafer's political vision. In the end it was Puccini's music and the characters themselves who won the day.

Strangely enough, however, this production did not in any way smack - as one might otherwise have expected - of any degree of affirmative action. Every one of the performers could very easily have been chosen on merit despite the relative lack of experience on the operatic stage on the part of most of them. Given the right degree of coaching they could quite easily have done full justice to the work in the original Italian. Without exception they showed a remarkable degree of musical and dramatic intelligence and the genuine rapport, joys, sorrows, depth of friendship and feeling which exists between the characters was conveyed in a fitting and genuinely moving fashion. Most outstanding contribution of all came from Agos Moahi who sang the role of Rodolfo

or, as referred to in this production, Rudolph.

Reviewing the Pretoria Technikon's Opera School production of *La Bohème* in the December 1993 issue of *Scenaria* (Issue 155), I said the following: "It is remarkable that, in South Africa today, there is a section of the artistic community calling for the abandoning of so-called "Eurocentric" art forms on the grounds that these expensive art forms have no relevance in our society (Yet) we are increasingly witnessing a burgeoning interest and, as I have repeatedly stated, there is no earthly reason why South Africa cannot be every bit as successful as the USA in putting excellent Black singers on the international operatic stage.

On 23 OctoberAgos Moahi, a young singing student delivered a spellbinding performance as Rodolfo in the Pretoria Technikon Opera School's production of Puccini's immortal *La Bohème*. In the past, I have praised Moahi's clean, intelligently musical vocal line in a number of Technikon productions, but, on this occasion, one felt that an important new opera star had been born on the Roodepoort stage. Moahi sang with fervour and meticulous phrasing and delivered a most moving, yet musically exciting performance. This is a voice with a good, solid lower register, yet capable of tackling the high tessitura of the role with consummate ease - even the high C in "*Che gelida manina*".

Since I wrote those words four years ago, Moahi has been languishing for the most part in the ranks of the PACT Opera Chorus, undiscovered and unused. Why? Why? Why? It is surely, an indictment upon opera management in this country for talent of this calibre to go unrecognised for such a lengthy period.

Moahi's performance in Cape Town was certainly no less rewarding - in fact, his approach to the role has matured and is even more convincing now at every level - both musically and dramatically - than it was previously. This was a performance that was utterly convincing and deeply moving and is one which clearly demonstrates the remarkable operatic talent which exists in our country if we only took the time and trouble to seek it out.

Singing opposite Moahi, in the role of Mimi was the highly accomplished Sibongile Mngoma whose solid assurance and vocal dexterity improves by leaps and bounds with every appearance on the operatic or concert stage. Her portrayal of Mimi was sincere and moving and the perfect foil for Moahi's Rudolph.

As Skolline (Colline), Bernard (Schaunard), Marcel (Marcello), Zwelilungile Zorro Sidloyi, Xolela Sixaba and Fikile Mvinjelwa all excelled. In the ensemble pieces they sang with precision and natural fluidity whilst at the same time building strong individual characterisations. Thokozani Mkhize was a saucy, sassy and vocally spritely Musetta whilst Marcus Desando gave two splendid cameo roles- as Whitey (Benoit) the Landlord and as Musetta's new boyfriend.

The chorus, the product of the Cape Opera Studio and the Cape Town Choral Training programme sang with distinc-

tion, precision and sometimes with more than the requisite enthusiasm.

Willie Anthony Waters conducted the Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra with the same degree of musicianship and insight as he imparted to the recent State Theatre production of *Porgy and Bess*. One sensed that in the support he accorded his singers during the performance, that their individual successes were due in no small measure to his guidance and support during the rehearsal process.

Despite my already stated reservations regarding the policy behind such exercises, I enjoyed *La Bohème Noir* enormously. Whilst I welcome any attempt at making opera more relevant to the age in which we live and therefore more accessible to a wider audience, I hope that the time will soon arrive when we no longer have to prove via racial/political juggling the valid position opera should occupy in our society especially if we are going to realise that, apart from our "Africaness", we still remain part of the international community. As countless other local opera productions as well as those which have been "Africanised" have already conclusively proven, we do have the artistic talent, black and white, to ensure this country's international standing in the operatic field. ●

Agos Moahi (Rudolph), Zwelilungile Zorro Sidloyi (Skolline) and Fikile Mvinjelwa (Marcel).

(Photo: Pat Bromilow-Downing.)



A NECESSARY BLESSING

OR, THE CASE FOR OPERA WITHIN OUR SOCIETY

by *Julius Eichbaum*

A great deal has been written and much has been spoken over the past seven or eight years regarding the future of the so-called "high" European art forms such as symphonic music, ballet and opera. Nowhere has the debate raged more fiercely than around the question of opera which is seen by many as being "elitist" and of no real relevance in the African, and more especially within the South African context.

Since opera was largely promoted in the past by the four Performing Arts Councils, each of whom were given magnificent, modern opera houses by the apartheid regime, opera has come to be viewed by some as being part of the cultural heritage of the white Afrikaner. This view was further reinforced by the fact that opera in South Africa, owed its very existence to the level of funding opera received from the State during the apartheid years. This, in itself is not unusual when viewed in the international context since opera, throughout the world, has always had to rely upon substantial outside assistance in order to survive.

With the political changes we have witnessed since 1994, and the birth of a new political era, the misconceptions at a political level about opera and the managerial style which accompanied it, it is perhaps hardly surprising that opera has become the major arts casualty under the new political dispensation.

Often viewed - quite unfairly in many instances - as being the most expensive, and consequently the most "elitist" of art

*Fidelio - CAPAB Opera 1990,
The Prisoners' Chorus.*

forms, those intent on seeking funding for projects which hitherto had not received their fair share of funding from the State, immediately seized upon opera as being the fat cow that could be first milked and then, finally, bled to death.

Whereas there has always been a dispute, internationally, between the creative artists and the performing artists regarding the fact that the performing arts invariably receive the largest slice of the arts funding cake, it was not surprising that the move in South Africa to "redistribute" arts funding should have been led by the visual artists, the writers and the poets who demanded, quite unfairly, that the funding playing fields should not only be levelled but be completely redesigned to suit their own needs. The reason for the imbalance between the funding required by the performing arts as opposed to the creative arts is quite simple. The performing arts, requiring infrastructures such as theatres, performing companies, technical staff, producers, designers, directors, etc. are quite obviously more costly to maintain. The creative artists, on the other hand, such as writers and painters, work in isolation and do not require the same costly infrastructures as the performing artists do (ie. dancers, singers and actors) in order to pursue their art. Sadly, the South African authorities were seriously misled by the creative art faction when it came to redrawing arts funding structures with the absurd result that the National Arts Council, in its first year of operation, has allocated the exact same sum of money (R900 000) to the disciplines of literature and the visual arts as it has to opera. Accordingly, whilst the former art forms have benefitted unfairly, opera is the undoubted loser and, currently, the entire future of opera (as well as the other performing arts disciplines) is severely threatened.

But why, some may ask, should the future of opera in South





La Bohème Noir - Members of Cape Town Opera's Choral Training Programme with l to r Vetta Wise (Chorus Master), a choir member, producer Michael Williams, Brian Williams (Provincial Director, Department of Labour, Western Cape), Tito Mboweni (Minister of Labour), Hal Shaper (librettist of La Bohème Noir), chorus member and singer Ronald Theys.



Chorus master, Vetta Wise, rehearses the chorus as part of Cape Town Opera's innovative Choral Training Programme.

Africa be assured?

In the first instance, it is an absolute fallacy for anyone to believe that opera is solely part of the heritage of the white Afrikaans speaking South African.

The entire history of opera in this country, in fact, clearly proves the contrary to be the case and it was only as a result of the establishment of the Performing Arts Councils by the National Party Government in 1963 that planted the seeds of political misconception about the art form. As far as can be ascertained, the first operatic performances took place at the Cape at the beginning of the 19th century, a time when the Cape was under British, rather than Afrikaaner dominance. The first theatre, the so-called African Theatre, opened in Cape Town in 1800 and the earliest performances were of *opéras comiques* and English comic opera.

Some were performed in Dutch translations, but many performances were given by French musicians on their way, via the Cape, to Mauritius. These included Méhul's *Un folie* and Rousseau's *Pygmalion*. Among the English works were *The Devil to Pay* and *The Poor Soldier*.

The first serious opera production, according to the Grove Dictionary of Opera, was Weber's *Der Freischütz*, given in Cape Town in 1831 in English. In the latter part of the 19th century, operatic touring companies from Britain and Europe gave frequent performances in Cape Town and Durban and, later, in Johannesburg.

The operas given were mainly drawn from the Italian repertoire but also included the works of Wagner, such as *Die Walküre* and *Die Meistersinger*. The trend of visiting opera companies continued well into the 20th century and from 1929 onwards the University of Cape Town Opera School, especially under the direction of Erik Chisholm (1951-1965) and Gregorio Fiasconaro (1952-1980) also presented regular seasons. Productions included the premieres of South Afri-

can works - in particular, operas by Chisholm and, in 1961, John Joubert's *Silas Marner*.

Between the years 1956 and 1969, the Cape based Eoan Group, under the direction of Joseph Manca, proved to be a formidable force in operatic life, giving performances of virtually all of the great Italian masterpieces, ranging from *La traviata* to *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and very often in the original language. Nobody today could ever accuse the Eoan Group of ever having been a "white, Afrikaans speaking body". This, in itself, poses the question: how did the idea that opera in South Africa was an almost exclusive preserve of the whites, irrespective of their language, arise in the first place? Was this not merely an excuse perpetrated by people keen to advance their own hidden agendas?

For two centuries opera has been very much part of the South African arts fabric and it is almost ironic to note that, as we move into the 21st century, the art form should, for the very first time, find its future threatened as never before - and, even more ironically, at a time when, under our first supposedly democratic government the politicians have promised "a new deal" for the arts as well as promising the protection of the cultural heritage of *all* of our citizens.

With the creation of the four Performing Arts Councils in 1963, the future of opera in South Africa seemed assured, having been placed on a firm, guaranteed financial footing for the first time. Yet, as those involved can testify, stories of opera having virtually unlimited money lavished on it by a munificent government of the past, have been grossly exaggerated.

Just as today, the arts under the National Party were, quite simply "not a priority" (Finance Minister, Barend du Plessis, 1987) and whenever the mood took them, the politicians, as today, turned to the soft target of the arts whenever they had to achieve a saving or two here and there.

Even before the 1994 elections, the National Party government had begun to seriously erode arts funding. This fact is borne out by the numerous articles on the subject which appeared in *Scenaria* at the time.



Amahl and the Night Visitors - Cape Town Opera.



Amahl and the Night Visitors - Cape Town Opera.

To what degree, then, was opera *really* synonymous with the ideals, aspirations and philosophy of the old political regime?

It cannot be denied that under the guidance of the Performing Arts Councils, especially on the part of PACT and CAPAB, opera in South Africa flourished, albeit often under difficult circumstances and by the 1980s one could truly state that opera in South Africa had reached artistic standards which were comparable with the best on offer anywhere else in the world.

With the new political dispensation any suggestion that anyone is "excluded" from participating in opera at any level - if, indeed, they really were in the past - is removed and this, in itself, means that South African opera today stands on the brink of achieving even greater things and higher international standards than ever before. In fact, we have the chance of producing something in the sphere of opera which would be quite unique in the world.

However, all that stands in the way of this prospect being achieved are those who feel, for whatever reason, that opera has no place in the so-called "new South Africa". This includes those who would deny opera the proper level of funding it needs to survive at the most basic level - let alone achieve something which could (and I believe *would*) focus world attention on this country.

Accordingly, I have set out to try and paint a picture as to why opera is, most certainly, *very* relevant to the new society in which we live and why the authorities should do everything possible to ensure the survival and ultimate flowering of the art form.

It is argued by some that, to black South Africans in particular, opera is irrelevant and of no consequence whatsoever. Some argue that, in the absence of proper housing for thousands, proper education and health services, we cannot afford to spend money on "luxuries" such as opera.

To this I would say that this government is quite capable, and has proved itself very adept at finding money for any project whenever it is in the mood to do so. I have yet to hear of there being insufficient funds everytime the politicians want a pay increase and, in any case, the money required for

opera is already sitting in the budget of the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC). It is simply being misdirected into areas which do not advance the cause of the arts as a whole and certainly does little or nothing for the broad public.

Secondly, I would argue that money spent on opera in South Africa at this stage of our history would not be money spent, but rather money *invested* in something which will ultimately deliver a substantial return in respect of tourism, royalties and employment opportunities.

I find it quite remarkable that, while the DAC winds its tedious way around avenues of esoteric discussion about "arts policy", the Western Cape Department of labour has realised that the arts, and in its case, opera, affords the opportunity for giving people meaningful employment.

Which is why the Western Cape Department of Labour has entered into an historic agreement with Cape Town Opera's Choral Training Programme. The programme provides training for historically disadvantaged young people who have the talent and who wish to pursue a career in opera. They are given courses in language, staff notation, music theory, voice production and stagecraft with an emphasis on choral work, the trainees' introduction to opera performance. Thus far the results, as we saw in past productions such as *La Bohème Noir* and more recently in Cape Town Opera's production of *Norma*. (see *Scenaria* July 1998), have been both encouraging and exciting.

At the time this historical co-operation between a provincial government department and an arts organisation came about, a spokesman for the Department described the agreement as a way of bringing the Arts and their disciplines into the labour market. "For the first time", he said, "artists are seen as workers and training is being provided to develop the previously disadvantaged".

At long last, someone in government has had the perspicacity to see the arts as an industry which provides jobs and wealth for the people and not merely as something esoteric and which is deserving of charitable handouts on the vague grounds that the arts are simply "good for the nation".

This, as I have said, is a far cry from the wishy-washy, vague approach of the national DAC whose entire mindset seems



Porgy and Bess - Cape Town Opera, Simon Estes and cast.



Porgy and Bess - Cape Town Opera

to be occupied with handouts to all and sundry and with the concept of "entitlement" very much to the forefront and a policy which does not lead to the attainment of self sufficiency.

So, there we have it - the arts, and especially opera, can create jobs, skills, self sufficiency and prosperity for the artists.

Then, of course, there is the question of the degree of wealth opera can create within the broader community and, especially, for the country as a whole. Quite obviously, and following on the argument of job creation, artists in employment broadens the base of taxpayers - the need for which the Minister of Finance is always quick to point out.

The current policy of the DAC of providing "handouts" does little or nothing to create full time employment, which is why I have consistently argued that the DAC should be funding structures which provide individual artists with employment, rather than funding the individual artists themselves.

What we need in this country is the realisation at an official level that the performing arts represent, in fact, an industry and money *correctly* employed in the furtherance of the arts is not an expense but, instead, it is an investment which ultimately pays dividends. The Austrian Government, to give but one example, annually ploughs millions of schillings into subsidising bodies such as the Vienna State Opera and the Salzburg Festival. Without this investment at an official level neither of these two institutions would be able to exist.

This substantial investment is not one which is made out of pure benevolence but is, instead, made with sound business motives since, at the end of the day, the Austrian Government has come to the realisation that this is an investment which pays them back most handsomely in foreign exchange, increased taxation on salaries paid to artists, increased taxation on the profits of hotels, restaurants, car hire firms, travel and ticket agencies, etc. , not to mention the literally hundreds of other commercial enterprises which benefit from the spending capacity of arts bodies and those members of the public who support them.

In the South African context, I have argued for years in favour of this country producing a festival of international re-

nown which would ultimately attract tourists from around the world. South Africa with its abundance of natural tourist resources and scenic beauty, not to mention the rich diversity of cultures to be found here, is uniquely placed to be able to offer the world an international arts festival quite unlike any other. Not even the annual Grahamstown Festival comes even close to what I have in mind since Grahamstown simply does not have the infrastructure to handle a festival of a size comparable with Salzburg, Edinburgh or even Bayreuth. Moreover, there simply is not a sufficient variety of programmes of internationally recognised art forms, such as ballet and opera, nor do we have the internationally regarded big name drawcards to attract international audiences.

The closest we have come to the kind of Festival I have in mind was the 1995 Cape Town Opera Festival which was, at least, a start in the right direction. Sadly, the powers that be, failed to grasp the significance of what had been accomplished on this occasion with the staging of only four operas.

I really, to this day, cannot understand why so many hundreds of millions of Rand were wasted on a ridiculous, vain attempt at trying to get the Olympic Games for South Africa in 2004. Nor, after this fiasco, can I understand the reasoning which motivates us now trying to get the World Soccer Cup in 2006.

Both these events are "one off" events and lead to no tangible long term benefits to anyone except the organisers who move from city to city every four years, invariably leaving in their wake countries and cities with a huge mountains of debt as a direct result of their having been pronounced the "winning host".

In short, both are extremely risky ventures in purely financial terms of a comparable level which none of the businessmen involved in the Cape Town Olympic bid would ever dream of taking within their own companies. An annual, on going opera festival in Cape Town, on the other hand, is not dependent upon the whims of outsiders such as the International Olympic Committee, would be much cheaper and a great deal more cost effective to run, would more easily fit into the existing infrastructure in terms of existing facilities, transport and hotel availability and, in its own right



La Bohème Noir - Cape Town Opera

could be every bit as prestigious for the nation as a whole, albeit on a smaller but less risky scale.

Had one taken the millions of Rand which were wasted in the Cape Town Olympic bid, and ploughed even a fraction of that sum into the establishment of an annual arts festival, incorporating opera, the one truly international art form, on a significant scale, we would today have much more to show for the experience. In addition, this country would have been well on the way to achieving the same degree of international recognition and respect which countries such as Scotland, Wales, Austria, Finland, France, Italy, Germany and the USA (to name but a few), have achieved though mounting their own unique opera festivals - all of which attract far more foreigners to their performers than they attract local audiences. In fact with reference to the annual Bayreuth Festival, the locals find it almost impossible, to obtain tickets, the overwhelming majority being snapped up by foreigners. In terms of foreign exchange earnings alone which an opera festival can bring in, as the old advertising saying goes: "You know it makes sense, don't you?"

Despite the clearly discernable advantages of this country staging an opera festival and despite the enormous success similar endeavours have proven to be in the rest of the world, the majority of South Africans, particularly those in control of artistic policy and funding, still labour under enormous misconceptions regarding opera.

There are still those who believe that opera, a seemingly expensive "foreign art form", can never find favour with black South Africans, or with hitherto disadvantaged persons. This is, to some degree true. After all not every Italian counts himself as an opera aficionado, any more than the majority of Englishmen are ardent Shakespearians.

Yet, there can be no denying the increasing number of black South Africans who are rapidly developing a passion for Western art, especially for classical music and for opera. This is part of the emergence of a new black South African middle-class which clearly believes that it is possible to retain the best of African tradition, yet, at the same time, also be a citizen of the world, enjoying the best that the world has to offer. After all, opera can and should be as much a part of our everyday lives as Western dress, modern medicine, the Volkswagen or a double malt whiskey and nobody



La Bohème Noir - Cape Town Opera

has yet argued convincingly that these things which we take for granted are going to erode those things our forefathers stood for.

If opera is, indeed, "elitist" then it is only elitist in terms of the true definition of the term, i.e. the best of something.

Opera, throughout the developed world, is in fact *not* only for those with a highly developed sense of musical appreciation - instead such people invariably tend towards an appreciation of chamber music and the art of the lieder singer.

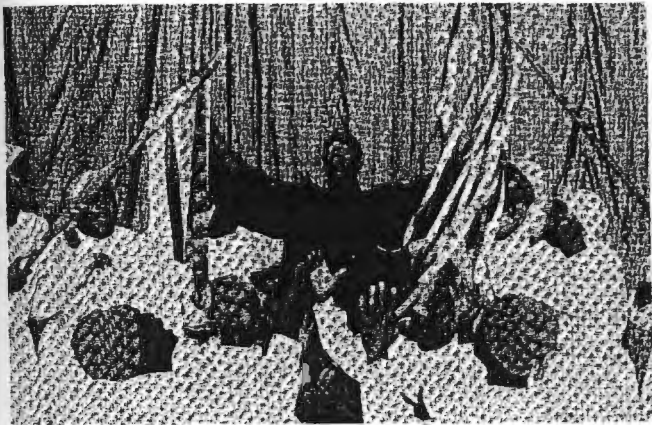
Opera, for the most part, is an art form which enjoys a far broader public appeal than any other area of classical music since it is ordinary people who identify with the very real, every day situations which composers and librettists seek to portray through the medium of opera. Therefore, when placed under the spotlight, opera is not at all alien to African culture which also has a long and fascinating tradition of story-telling.

Opera can, in fact, compliment, the African story telling tradition through the setting of stories to music.

Moreover, one must not overlook the very strong choral tradition of black South Africans, but, as Michael Williams of Cape Town Opera so rightly points out, this tradition, nurtured through involvement with church choirs and choral groups, relies on a very specific kind of harmony which stems from the limited range of expression one finds in the church music taught by the missionaries at the turn of the last century. As such, the so-called African choral tradition has reached what Williams refers to as "a glass ceiling".

Having explored existing choral music to its very limits, our black choir members are ready to move on and, as Williams has experienced with the Cape Town Opera Choral Training Programme, when they are suddenly exposed to opera with its wide range of harmonies and degrees of expression black choral singers immediately find themselves captivated by the new art form.

Choral music is also, by its very nature, static. Suddenly, choir members placed on the operatic stage find that they are encouraged to give full rein to their inherent dramatic instincts.



Enoch, Prophet of God - Cape Town Opera.



The Orphans of Qumba - Cape Town Opera.

The combination of singing and acting is very much part of African tradition and hitherto few Africans have had the chance of expressing themselves in this manner and of actually being paid to do so.

This, Williams feels, is very much the reason behind the success of the Cape Choral Training Programme where auditions for the few available places are literally swamped by hundreds of hopeful applicants. This, in itself, proves that there is a strong demand from the community that opera in South Africa should flourish, yet the authorities, particularly within the DAC, seem to turn a blind eye to this reality, preferring instead to believe that opera is the preserve of a rich, predominantly white minority and, as such, is not deserving of funding.

It is curious that, given the very real evidence of an emerging interest in opera across the board in South Africa, that opera is not given its due by the authorities as a serious, fully legitimate art form in its own right. At the level of the National Arts Council, for instance, opera, as an arts discipline is lumped in as a kind of afterthought together with music, while dance (very rightly) is accorded a committee of its own. Opera remains the Cinderella art form in the minds of the powers that be, yet in the real world to which the authorities continue to turn a blind eye, our training institutions and voice teachers are turning out literally dozens of exceptionally fine black singing talents who, if things continue the way they are, will have nowhere to take their talent.

Quite apart from the sterling work being undertaken by Cape Town Opera, one can also turn to the pioneering work being done by *Opera Africa* - a phenomenal success story if there ever was one - and the very fine young black singers being turned out of the Pretoria Technikon Opera School, the Opera School of the University of Durban Westville and by singing teachers all over the country such as Emma Renzi and Marita Napier, to name but two.

Quite apart from singers such as Sidwill Hartman and Virginia Davids who carry on the magnificent tradition set by the Eoan Group more than three decades ago, singers such as Raphael Vilakazi, Agos Mohai, Sibongile Mngoma, Sibongile Khumalo, Marcus Desando, Abel Motsoadi and literally countless others are rapidly becoming household

names within their own communities and are acting as forceful role models in terms of opera and what the art form can and should represent.

But to return to the relevance of opera within the African context, one cannot lose sight of the fact that the concept of music combined with drama is very much a part of African tradition - one finds music and drama being combined in just about every aspect of tribal life - within tribal initiation rites, the accompaniment to the ceremonial slaughter of an ox, or to give expression to courting rites. This alone, Michael Williams says, provides South African opera librettists and composers with a fertile source of material which he feels passionately needs to find its way onto the professional operatic stage.

He believes that it is now time that the people of this country are given the opportunity of telling their story on the operatic stage and he has been very much at the forefront in the development of a brand of opera which is unique in that it stems, not from Italy or Germany where opera has a strong tradition, but from Africa. Together with composer Roelof Temmingh, Williams has already set this creative spirit in motion with works such as *Enoch, Prophet of God* and, more recently, *Buchuland*.

Until now, many people - including both the present and former Minister of Arts and Culture - have viewed opera as something of a necessary evil; something to be paid lip service in terms of arts planning and arts funding. Believing opera to be, at best, the preserve of the privileged few and, at worst, an art form which remains a throwback to the days of apartheid, they have done their level best to relegate opera to the backburner at every level.

Yet, events are rapidly overtaking them. Hardly a day goes by without another stunning young voice emerging from a hitherto disadvantaged community saying: "I want to SING!.....and I want to sing OPERA!"

Given this fact and the very tangible benefits and wealth which opera can bring to our nation, is it not about time that our politicians and arts Mandarins realised that opera, rather than being a necessary evil, is, in fact, something which, in the unique South African context, could be a very necessary blessing?●

WHY OPERA IS RELEVANT TO THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA

by Julius Eichbaum

"I have never thought of opera as "white" music. Obviously, it's not a traditional African art form, but it's been around in South Africa for centuries.

What's democracy worth if we are going to take out everything that's not indigenous?"

- Abel Motosadi - Black South African opera singer in a recent newspaper interview.

Ever since the possibility of a new political dispensation in South Africa was perceived to be reality, the future of what has been termed in certain quarters "the high European arts" in this country has been called into question by a number of individuals and organisations.

In particular, the future of opera and classical ballet has been called into question amid statements that these art forms are "elitist", they do not enjoy mass appeal, they are too expensive to stage, being of European origin, they have no place within an African society such as ours and that, hitherto, blacks had been deliberately "excluded" from these art forms.

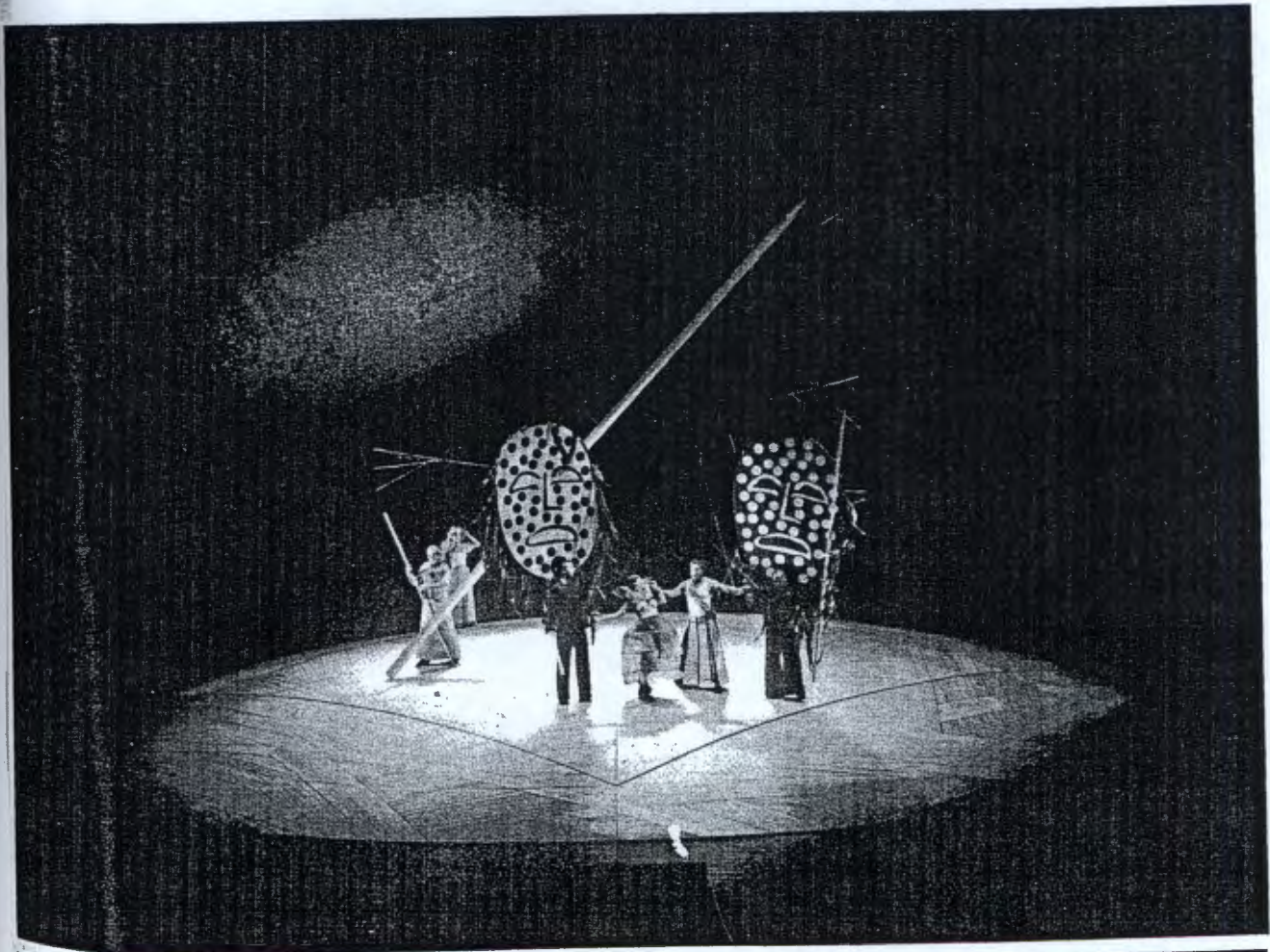
All these statements, with the exception of the last two, are true and apply in equal measure to any other country one would care to name. Yes, these art forms *are* "elitist", but to use the word in its correct form as defined in the Oxford Dictionary and not in the perjorative sense that it has come to mean in the course of this debate.

Certainly, these art forms universally do not enjoy mass support - but then no single serious performing arts discipline in this country does - or in any other country, for that matter!

Yes, they *are* expensive to stage bearing in mind the enor-

African art? No, but if Europe can do it, why can't we? Wagner's Das Rheingold at the Bayreuth Festival, 1994.

(Photograph: Bayreuther Festspiele GmbH / Rauh)



mous resources in terms of manpower (such as stage hands, set painters, musicians, technical staff, singers, chorus members, producers etc.), support infrastructure, such as suitable, specially equipped theatres, workshops etc. they demand.

But are these truly valid reasons as to why they need to be omitted or drastically scaled down in our new society?

I think not !

Although I am an eager supporter of classical ballet, I should like, in answering some of these criticisms and making a case for the "high European arts" in South Africa, to concentrate on opera, knowing that the arguments I am going to advance apply in equal measure to ballet.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "elitist", stemming from the word "elite" as being "the choice part or flower (of society etc.)". No mention is made of any other definition or possible meaning. What, one might ask, is wrong with having something which can be identified in these terms? Is it not desirable in our society that we should have something to which everyone can aspire?

If by the term "elitist", those who would wish to see "high

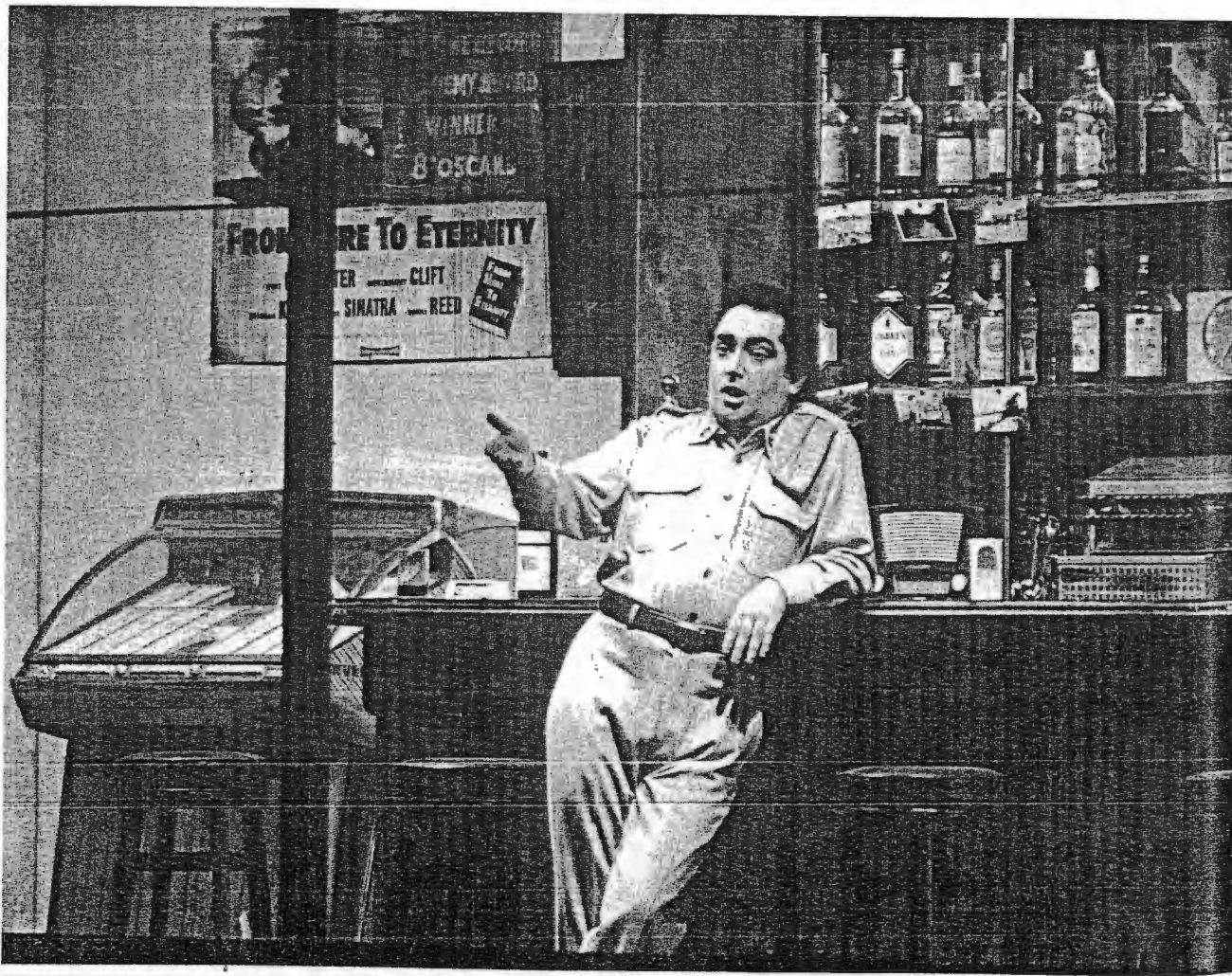
European art" destroyed and denied its rightful place in society, mean - as I suspect they do - that these art forms have, historically, been the preserve of a predominantly white audience, then I must agree with them.

However, that situation is an historical one and has much to do with the inequalities which existed, and continue to exist, in our education system. It also has much to do with socio-political and economic factors and the fact that these art forms, for decades, both financially and geographically, were out of the reach of the vast majority of South Africans of all races.

The teaching of even a basic appreciation of these art forms was conspicuous by its absence in the vast majority of South African schools - even most of the expensive, private schools which catered to the wealthiest of white families. In many instances, white children were equally discriminated against in this respect, as were their black, coloured or Asian counterparts. Therefore, a white person living on the outskirts of a town could not, because of distance, attend the opera even if he had wanted to, whilst, in the wealthy urban areas the opportunity to attend an opera performance had not even been instilled in the average white South African.

This curious contradiction of circumstances within the white

Opera does not have to be an outdated museum piece. A scene from English National Opera's production of Verdi's Rigoletto. This production from the early eighties by Jonathan Miller sets the action against a Mafia background around New York's East River.



community has not, as far as I am aware, been addressed by anyone as yet, least of all those who shout the word "elitist" with the loudest voice.

Yet, despite these negative effects, the Performing Arts Councils, over a period of more than three decades, succeeded admirably in building up audiences, first within the white community and, more recently, within the townships, to a point where, today, we are witnessing an ever increasing awareness of the arts and a willingness to participate on the part of more and more South Africans drawn from all walks of life.

In short, the Performing Arts Councils have, until now, done what I believe to be a sterling job in remedying the serious past omissions on the part of our various Education Departments.

Regarding the lack of so-called lack of mass support for opera, one should bear in mind that even in the most advanced countries of the world, with millions of dollars to spend on the arts, regular support for the performing arts amounts to, at the most, 4% of the population. This, in itself, is not a valid reason for us to dismiss the performing arts so lightly and, in the present South Africa, the lack of mass appeal argument is on a par with an argument which dictates that, since the majority of South Africans are illiterate, we should no longer continue spending money on libraries. Numerous other analogies spring readily to mind.

Certainly opera and ballet *are* expensive to maintain - but then so are other things - such as Parliament and, despite

the fact we get better value for money, at a fraction of the cost, from our opera houses and our performing artists, nobody has yet suggested we abandon Parliament on the grounds that it is expensive to maintain.

One wonders whether those whose argument against opera is based on the fact that it is expensive, are trying to tell us that we should only go for those things which are cheap and nasty. Well, there are certainly plenty of things in that category and I wish them the best of luck. No discernment or intelligence is needed to make one's selection from such a lengthy list.

Yet, in considering cost, we should remind ourselves that South African managements have, on the whole, displayed a remarkable degree of resourcefulness in ensuring that we are given productions of the great masterpieces, staged at an international standard, on a fraction of the budgets available to managements in Europe and America. If there is any truth in the old saying "You get what you pay for", then we have been blessed indeed. The R42 million that PACT, in its entirety, (ie *all* departments) received last year, is less than the grant given in *one week* to a management such as the Vienna State Opera and, at less than £7 million, it is an infinitesimal fraction of what the Royal Opera receives as its annual grant-in-aid.

Yet, we must also bear in mind, that we are also blessed with no less than five major theatre complexes which are among the finest in the world, equipped as few others are and which, despite their considerable annual cost in terms of maintenance, cost less to run than the older major opera houses of

Enoch - Prophet of God : *An opera with a South African theme.*



the world - the majority of which have working conditions backstage that are positively primitive by our standards.

In having these truly remarkable theatre complexes, the cost of running the performing arts is greatly reduced by international standards. We should also not forget the dedication of the staff which run them, earning a great deal less than their overseas counterparts.

Absurd and ridiculous as it might be, the criticism that opera, being of European origin, has no place in our "African" society, continues to be heard in certain quarters and, therefore, needs to be answered.

Why opera and ballet should be singled out for criticism as being "European", and, consequently, alien is anyone's guess, especially when these same critics fail to single out other things which had their origins in Europe - such as motor cars, x-rays, soccer, cricket, rugby, the English language, democracy, architecture, engineering etc. - and which make our lives easier and more enjoyable.

The "Eurocentric" argument is wearing a little thin and is only really banded about these days by people who are either perverse or just plain ignorant.

As we all know, opera, despite its origins and tradition, is today a universally accepted art form, in no way restricted in its appeal to the countries of Europe. In fact, throughout the world, in countries as diverse as Japan, Korea, Russia, the USA and the countries of South America are witnessing an opera boom which, in some cases, even outstrips the opera boom taking place in Europe. Verdi, Puccini, Strauss and Wagner are today every bit as universal as are the works of Shakespeare.

It is ironic that after suffering years of the debilitating effects of the international cultural boycott against South Africa, just as we are about to resume our rightful place in the international arena, there are some who would oppose such a step.

Opera belongs to the entire world and South Africa is very much a part of that world and we simply cannot allow the resumption of our place in that world to be dictated by others in an eclectic fashion which accepts some benefits and declines others.

Unless one is living in the deepest part of the Amazon jungle, untouched by civilisation, Eurocentricism is going to play a major part in one's life - whether one wants it or not and South Africa, as the most developed country in Africa, is the most Eurocentric country on the continent.

Yes, it is true that in former years, black South Africans were excluded - for one reason or another - from participating, either as performer or as a member of the audience, in a variety of art forms, including opera. *Does this mean that we should now continue to exclude them??*

Even if one should want to exclude anyone from the black community from participating in opera, many, within that community, having been exposed to opera have developed a

taste for the art form. I am constantly surprised at the knowledge and interest displayed by ordinary black South Africans in opera.

I am excited at the prospect of one day seeing black South African opera singers dominate the international opera stages. Already, in this country, and despite claims of "exclusion" we are seeing a phenomenal growth of exceptional singing talent in the black community.

I am on record as having predicted that one day, if opera is allowed to develop along the lines it should, this country will produce black singers in greater numbers and of greater ability than *anything* that has yet come out of the United States - and I hold by that view!

The argument against opera and ballet is motivated largely, as we all know, by people who are anxious to lay their hands on the facilities and, above all, the money these art forms currently use. But what is the case for opera in our society?

Opera has been described as a lavish, irrational and extravagant entertainment, yet, as anyone who has fallen under the spell of this art form knows, such a description fails to explain why, the world over, millions of sane, rational people, most of whom usually have exceptionally modest tastes react in such an enthusiastic manner - often bordering upon over zealotry - to this art form.

Opera is the quintessential performing art form, embodying, as it does, all the other artistic disciplines - music, singing, dance, drama, poetry and literature and even the visual arts and architecture in terms of set designs. At its best it is all embracing and it has the power to move us in a manner that no other art form manages to do.

Opera has the power to convey to us messages about the human condition, the entire gamut of human emotions and our interaction with our fellow man.

I wonder how the late and unlamented Minister of Justice, Jimmy Kruger, would have reacted had he known that *Fidelio* was a strong indictment of imprisonment without trial and political murder by the State - the very crimes he was perpetrating at the time. I have no doubt that it would have left him even more cold and that he would have immediately closed down every opera house in the country on the grounds that opera was undermining the country. But, what a powerful human message was gained by anyone watching or listening to this supposedly "irrational" work of art.

Fidelio reminded many of us what was going on before our very eyes in our own country and to which we had become blind. Numerous other analogies can be drawn using a wide variety of operas drawn from the repertoire.

Despite obvious language differences, opera has managed to bring peoples and cultures, from all over the world, closer together. It is a sobering thought that on a single evening Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Verdi's *Aida*, Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* and Wagner's *Meistersinger* - each with their own unique message - can play in cities as diverse as Vienna, Tokyo, Moscow, London, New York and even Cape Town of

Pretoria.

Opera is a major part of *world* culture - and can the new South Africa *really* cut itself off from the rest of the world?

Is opera, indeed, alien to our culture in our capacity as the most advanced country on the African continent?

Opera is the art of storytelling set to music and storytelling and music are very much a part of African culture. As the new South African opera, *Enoch, Prophet of God* revealed when it was premiered earlier this year by CAPAB Opera, opera within the African context is not in the least bit alien.

If, in the 1980s, at Bayreuth, they can mount a space age, high tech production of Wagner's *Ring* cycle, depicting all the horrors of the technological age, including Chernobyl, - *and make it work!* - just think of the opportunities open to us.

I, personally, would love to see a full scale production mounted of Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* in a Zulu setting. Again, the possibilities for an enterprising opera producer are endless, there being any number of operas which could be developed to reflect life in South Africa or even the South

African situation.

This is especially true of those operas in which the central theme is one of reconciliation and the brotherhood of man.

Do I, perhaps, sound a shade too idealistic? Again, I think not.

Those who argue against opera, citing the expense, the art form's supposed irrelevance to the age and the country in which we live, clearly have no understanding whatsoever about the medium. To them opera is nothing more than an extravagant museum piece supported by a minority of eccentric, wealthy, white skinned socialites. They couldn't be more wrong - and in making such assertions they only reveal their ignorance.

The standard of opera in South Africa today is of undoubted international standard. Given the right circumstances and the right kind of encouragement on the part of both government and the private business sector, and adequate funding from both these sectors, South Africa, with all its resources in terms of talent and existing infrastructure, could emerge within the next decade as one of the great opera producing nations of the world. ●

It is a fallacy to believe that all opera is lavish and expensive to stage, like this production of Der Rosenkavalier in Munich. Yet, even this expensive production more than paid for itself, having been in the repertoire of the Bavarian State Opera for over a decade and was seen by hundreds of thousands of people - even millions, taking into account the television transmissions and the highly successful video production it generated.



The Argus 18.09.2011 Macbeth dazzles in every department

MACBETH

Reviewer: Carl Fourie

DIRECTOR: Brett Bailey

SOLOISTS: Simphiwe Qavane, Ntsikilelo Mali, Ntombizodumo Mboniswa, Tina mene

CONDUCTOR: Christopher Dowdeswell; University of Cape Town Symphony Orchestra

VENUE: Artscape Opera House tonight, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday

Overwhelmed! Overwhelmed by Shakespeare's genius and relevance; overwhelmed by the power of the theatrical production; overwhelmed by the stupendous voices of the singers.

Brett Bailey, together with Pieter Louis van Dijk, has reduced Verdi's Macbeth to a non-stop 90 minutes of exploring the malevolence of the human urge for power, and the rich musical text of Italian opera.

Direction is brilliant. From seating arrangements to make-up; from lighting effects to four seething spirit beings that permeate the fabric of the production; from glorious vocal forces to intense, desperate drama.

There is no let-up in the bizarre tale of wanton power and the horrendous conse-



OUTSTANDING: SIMPHIWE QAVANE AS MACBETH, WITH NTOMBIZODUMO MBONISWA, RIGHT, AS LADY MACBETH

quences of a guilty conscience. Special mention must be made of the choreography of the nameless individuals who so accurately and constantly helped create that eerie netherworld of the spirits, as well as the female chorus whose arm gestures and silent facial contortions sent shivers down one's spine. Banquo's murder was poignant and thus all the more powerful. Lady Macbeth's macabre bloodied dolls and her insane

death were moments of terror. The ethereal synthesiser music of Macbeth's apparitions and the dust appearances of Banquo's ghost were spellbinding (excuse the pun). But surely the most rewarding experience of the evening was the magnificent voices that were heard. What a showcase of choral and solo talent! And thus what a pity if other national (and international) centres are not afforded the opportunity of experiencing this outstanding production.

Never again can opera be referred to as a Eurocentric phenomenon.

The chorus was trained by Angelo Gobato. Both the female and the mixed choruses excelled. The unity of sound, their appreciation of the harmonic whole, the quality of volume, and their individualised dramatic import impressed greatly.

Of the smaller solo roles, Nkosana Sitimela as the ill-fated Banquo, and Zamile Gantana as the doctor deserve

mention. Their voices are well developed and have a most pleasant tone.

Simphiwe Qavane and Ntsikilelo Mali shared the title role, and Ntombizodumo Mboniswa and Tina Mene shared Lady Macbeth. What was most pleasing to see was that each person in each pair did not try to outdo the other; rather they together conveyed the character. And how Qavane's and Mboniswa's voices have grown in stature over the years.

Both Qavane and Mali have deep, rich baritone voices and are most able dramatists too. Mboniswa and Mene are wonderful dramatic sopranos: the former has a most impressive technique, and the latter (although failing twice on top notes) has a sumptuous tone quality.

Not only is choral and solo work good, but so too is ensemble. The duets between Macbeth and his Lady were memorable moments. There was an acute awareness of each other's musical role and a beauty of sonority between the intertwining lines.

For all Grade-11 English teachers out there: make sure your students see this production. It is a tour de force of Shakespeare and is also a golden opportunity to introduce the little darlings to the world of opera. And to everyone else: see this production if it's the only theatre outing you have this year. It is an unforgettable musical and dramatic experience.

Baroque meets Africa in 'Dido'

Reviewer: Carl Fourie

Dido and Aeneas, directed by Paul Stern

Orchestra and Chorus conducted by Hans Huysen

Free Flight Dance Company, choreographed by Adele Blank

Soloists: Sibongile Mngoma, Brad Liebl, Angela Kerrison, Tina Mene

Nahum Tate's beautifully poetic text was set to the most exquisitely pristine music by Henry Purcell. Indeed, with Purcell's death in 1695, English opera itself died. And it wasn't until 250 years later that it again shone brightly with Benjamin Britten's compositions.

The juxtaposition of traditional Baroque instruments and an African instrumental ensemble is not as incongruous as it initially may be perceived. The former group was led by Hans Huysen, the latter (Amapondo) by Dizu Plaatjies.

The Baroque strings and continuo of lute, harpsichord and cello formed a wonderful anecdote to the more romantic orchestral timbres one is used to. And the enigmatic cyclic melodies of marimbas, mbiras and drum tones seemed to fuse naturally with the smaller Baroque timbre.

Peter Cazalet's costumes deserve both praise and poops. The female costumes cleverly combine traditional Baroque costumes with an African flavor. The earthy colors, head-dresses and jewelry are masterstrokes of creative flare in this regard. Dido's costume in particular is majestic in regal splendor.

But Aeneas' seventeenth century garb pooped; it just wasn't in any relevant context. Nor was Mercury: a Roman soldier in rural northern Africa, sent by central African witches, with a Classical Aeneas? Maybe not!

Adele Blank's choreography intended to add to the mythology and ancestral traditions of Africa. While one admires the athletic prowess of the Free Flight Dance Company's members, it remains an unanswered question as to whether they succeeded with this intent.

Similarly, the over-the-top "acting" of the witches and their minions reduced the pathos of this delicate opera to slapstick comedy. Instead of being a suitable diabolic contrast to the tender love between Dido and Aeneas, they were just silly and out of place.

But it was vocally that Paul Stern's production disappointed the most. Besides both lines of Derick Ellis' interlude and Angela Kerrison's impassioned Belinda, this production just didn't come up to standard.

The chorus sounded ill-prepared. There was unsatisfactory balance and, on occasion, imperfect pitch. Several entries were inaccurate and imprecise.

Beggar's Opera, by Dimpho Di Kopane (Combined Talents)

At Spier Amphitheatre until 25 February

Soloists: Lungelwa Blou, Bongani Bubu, Mvuyisi mjali, Ruby Mthethwa, Jim Ngxabaze, Sibusiso Ziqubu and others

The theatre group Dimpho Di Kopane was previously known rather presumptuously as the South African Academy of Performing Arts.

I recall their production of The Beggar's Opera two years ago at the Joseph Stone Theatre with fondness. It was creative and vibrant, and succeeded admirably in fusing an English folk opera with African realities. It made inventive use of the Stone's limited facilities, and the cherry on top was the wonderful use of wired sculptures, which translated the production to a higher level of theatrical enjoyment.

At that production many of then inexperienced voices were pleasant and showed signs of great promise. Among them was Pauline Malefane, who a year earlier, had sung the title role in SAAPA's production of Carmen at Spier. This reviewer was one of a few who was unimpressed by that unimaginative and vocally inferior production.

And not much has changed as to their latest offering of The Beggar's Opera. There is no decor, which leads to dramatic confusion, as the brothel, prison and wedding scenes are practically indistinguishable from each other.

Matters may have been alleviated if the languages used were audibly discernable. While my Xhosa is non-existent, me thinks my English is sort-of okay. Quite frankly, this production may as well have been "sung" in Icelandic. Pronunciation was appalling beyond description.

And the singing was atrocious. There was not one "singer" I could hold up as a ray of hope in this company. Even the one-time hopeful Malefane has justly been relegated to a minor role. Then there are those who didn't make it into other opera companies assisting with the damage. And finally mix in others who sang leads now and who were just shocking.

Yes, I know someone is going to mention African pitching as opposed to Western scales. But that is not the issue at stake here: sheer faulty singing is inexcusable no matter what the context. Ending ensembles on minor variations of the same note is horrible on the ears. Simple melodic lines sung with much fluctuations is akin to inducing motion sickness.

And the amount of shouting in both "spoken" and "sung" passages irked me considerably. Vocal volume can be attained by shouting or by well trained voice projection. Guess which of these two possibilities was evidenced on opening night? The former!

Acting at best can be described as over the top - although amatuerish also comes to mind. (The production at the Stone by comparison, was quite acceptable) The sole exception to this was Bongani Bubu (Macheath), who managed to bring a good level of emotion to his turbulent character.

One struggles to find redeeming features of this production, but here goes: the costumes, as at the Stone, generally were a good combination of sixteenth century attire and Africana. And some musical touches - usually the more subtle ones - were effective. In particular the gentle rhythms created by the opening sticks and later by the bottles in the apparant pub scene. Occasional humming and background hissing proved evocative, too.

But in total, those scenes were no more than five minutes in a production of an hour and a half

TAUT, ARRESTING ADAPTATION

Africanised Macbeth is a hit

Cape Town Opera, Artscape Theatre, Verdi (adapted Peter Van Dijk): **MACBETH**, with Ntombizodumo Mboniswa/Tina Mene, Simpfiwe Gavane/Ntsikilelo Mali; Nkosana Sitimela, Desmond Ntshembe, Zamlile Gantana; Snglam CTP and UCT Opera School Chorus and Orchestra conducted by Christopher Dowdeswell, directed by Brett Bailey, designed by Michael Mitchell; lighting by Kobus Rossouw (until September 23). **DEON IRISH** reviews.



EVIL PERSONIFIED: Tina Mene alternates with Ntombizodumo Mboniswa as Lady Macbeth.

THIS is an unquestionably extraordinary theatrical experience for what is, ultimately, a student production. Director Brett Bailey and composer Peter Van Dijk have taken the Verdi opera, as derived from the Shakespeare play, disassembled it, and put the essential elements back together as a taut, furiously paced African allegory.

The staging is enormously engaging; the audience is seated on raised stands running the depth of the stage and the action takes place primarily on the stage revolve, which attains the idiom status of a boma or a kraal. With the orchestra sensibly retained in the pit, the action occurs in front of it and attains enormous immediacy.

Strategically placed monitors are designed to allow singers to follow Christopher Dowdeswell's direction pretty much whatever their stage positioning. The transportation of this tale into a deeply rural African somewhere is relatively painless. Eleventh-century Scotland was only just emerging from a tribal wilderness of superstition and ruthless warlords; the unspecified locality of this production represents a lingering "backwater wasteland", to quote Bailey's notes. The basic elements of the

are otiose. The dual casting was an attempt to afford appropriate students the chance to sing the role, in part at least. I cannot say the alteration of cast proved a stumbling block, although it would have been more interesting if the alterations had been employed to reflect elements of the drama, rather than merely mirroring scenes.

Van Dijk has ensured the retention of the major arias of the work, so we had a surprisingly mature Una macchia, with fine accompaniment, from Mboniswa and an engaging Brindisi from Mene. Mboniswa also impressed in her opening Vieni, t'adretta and in the great first act sotto voce duet.

In this she was assisted by the redolent tones of Gavane, a barrel of a man whose voice demonstrates enormous sonority. Alternating was the altogether slighter Mali, whose voice, however, belies his frame. Both of these baritones show astonishing promise. Of the lesser roles, Gavane's briefly heard bass, as the Doctor, impressed immediately.

Dowdeswell handled Van Dijk's subtly adapted score with aplomb, although some of the choral and singing entries were a little suspect. Judging from the minuscule movement of his hands visible on the monitors, I would suggest that he adopt larger gestures for these dangerous moments. The student orchestra does UCT proud and the chorus - largely first-year students - is remarkably good.

This is a production that anyone interested in an emerging South African operatic identity or in arresting stagecraft should not miss. As the running time is less than that of the average video, the prospect of a late night provides no excuse.

to status and wealth, they transmogrify into vulture-like figures, insinuating murder and bloodlust. As theatrical spectacle it proved riveting, but one was left with questions about deeper understandings.

The core of the Shakespearean tragedy and, even if to a lesser extent, the Verdi opera, is that the potential for evil lies within. Macbeth responds to an unexpected suggestion that precisely mirrors his latent ambition; Lady Macbeth's ruthless single-mindedness seizes upon prophecy to justify reality. The central problem with Bailey's staging is that it externalises evil. It's a Bill Cosby "The Devil made me do it" scenario, but without the latter's satire.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, comparisons which, we all know, interact with fidelity to the drama and with a self-involved element that makes the dismissive handling of the lesser characters narrowly appropriate. The visionary images portrayed on the chorus screen were the only element that did not really work, not because the idea was flawed but because execution proved less than adequate. There is time to remedy this. On the other hand, the visual effect of the chorus through the selfsame screen achieved extraordinary impact.

SPIER SUMMER SEASON: Gay and Pepusch's "THE BEGGAR'S OPERA"; with Bongani Bubu, Mvuyisi Mjali, Ruby Mthethwa, Otto Siqubu, Lungelwa Blou, Bulelwa Cosa, Andries Mbali and other members of Dimpho di Kopane; directed by Mark Dorndord-Yates, designed by Jessica Dornford-May, musical direction Charles Hazlewood.

JOHN GAY, who wrote the libretto of "The Beggar's Opera" which had its first performance in Lincoln Inn's Inn Fields in January 1728, had written the following lines in his "Trivia" of 1716: "Where Lincoln's Inn, wide space, is rail'd around, cross not with venturous step; there oft is found the lurking thief, who, while the daylight shone, made the walls echo with his begging tone..."

We are immediately and effectively translated into this milieu in the opening scene of this consistently inventive and hugely enjoyable production, by the simple device of the cast of cut-throat thieves donning sunglasses and adopting white canes. For this is an opera not so much about beggars, as about rogues who employ beggary as criminal industry. It's a theme which will resonate with many Capetonians.

The chief proponents are Mr Peachum, an enterprising 18th century "fence" (and his mesmerizingly awful wife), Mr Lockit (the avariciously corrupt gaoler) and MacHeath, an infamous but very attractive highwayman. The Peachums run a gang, the members of whom are, at convenient times, surrendered to the authorities for the reward.

The other strand of the plot is the womanizing MacHeath's involvement with the daughters of both the Peachum and Lockit families. He marries Polly Peachum to her parent's chagrin ("Our Polly is a sad slut!"): they determine to widow her by arranging MacHeath's capture and inevitable execution at Tyburn. Whilst incarcerated, MacHeath contracts a purported second marriage with Lockit's daughter, Lucy, who assists him to escape.

All of these delightful goings-on are set to an engaging collection of melodies, arranged by JC Pepusch and derived from English ballades, Irish, Scottish and French tunes and songs by composers as diverse as Purcell, Clarke, Handel and Frescobaldi.

This production is sub-titled "Ibali loo Tsotsi"; and, while terming it a "tale" loses some of the satirical point of beggar's mounting the socially lofty operatic art form, the transmutation of 18th century London beggars into local tsotsis is entirely felicitous - no, glorious!

The production is not contemporary in design or intent, although there are anachronistic features which span the centuries - like Peachum's very business-like revolver. Costuming is firmly in the first half of the 18th century, with the characters being deliciously deconstructed from relatively entire headdress and torso costumes to (mostly) bare feet. MacHeath is an exception, with Bubu once again being given full opportunity to vaunt a naked torso.

Lighting matches design in discreet effect. There is little in the way of set - other than what amounts to a pergola of hangman's nooses. But what is required is effectively created: the thieves' staves are easily transformed into prison bars; eight men portray a coach and four most effectively.

Musically, the production is astonishing. There is very little in the way of instrumental accompaniment: some percussion, discreet use of marimbas and a touch of accordion. Much of the singing is a Capella and the cast even manage a hummed overture. The simple strength of most of the melodies make such treatment not merely viable but actually effective.

The large cast perform with distinction. The uxorial Peachums are well conceived by Mvuyisi Mjali and Ruby Mthethwa, the former a real hood, the latter a vicious shrew. Some of the interplay between them is delicious. Lockit (Otto Ziqubu) is simply wonderful: a carefully observed portrait of unchecked petty officialdom. They are all vocally secure.

Of the two girls, I was drawn to Bulelwa Cosa's Lucy Lockit, a heavily pregnant minuscule given to sudden and astounding rages. She is also vocally arresting, her Purcellian song "When young

at the bar" being one of the evening's highlights. Bubu is an engaging MacHeath, looking every inch the womaniser he portrays so well. His light baritone is pleasingly effective.

The large chorus handle the many smaller roles with gratifying success and the whole is imbued with irrepressible energy and enthusiasm. The interpolations of Xhosa are entirely appropriate and do not impinge on understanding the plot at all, being essentially applied in the manner of seasoning. I was pleased to observe that care was being taken with diction and that, in general, the spoken dialogue was more easily followed than had been the case with "Rocky Horror". One persisting problem, however, is that final consonants are still being dropped by many players.

In summary, I found this an enormously enjoyable and theatrically rewarding staging of a delightfully unpretentious work. Musically, it is not merely innovative but achieves real import. Dornford-May and Hazlewood deserve their respective plaudits.

Deon Irish

CAPE TOWN OPERA at SPIER: Purcell's "DIDO AND AENEAS"; with Sibongile Ngoma, Brad Liebl, Angela Kerrison, Tina Mene, Derick Ellis, Christopher Ainslie; conducted by Hans Huysen, directed by Paul Stern, designed by Peter Cazalet, lighting by Kobus Rossouw, choreography by Adèle Blank (until the 27th)

PAUL STERN'S realisation of Purcell's best-known opera is as rewardingly inventive and literate a production as one could desire. It is coupled with strikingly attractive designs by Peter Cazalet and an informed account of the lovely score by Hans Hussen, in a happy marriage of operatic disciplines.

Purcell's opera - it's running time of a little over an hour making it really a fleshed-out masque - deals with the episode in the Aeneid (Odyssey) when Aeneas (Odysseus) reaches Carthage, the capital of the then North African power, and becomes romantically involved with its Queen, Dido. Something similar was to happen in Egypt with Antony and Cleopatra just a few centuries later.

This meeting of cultures mirrors similar interfaces throughout history, with the continuing ebb and flow of individual peoples and cultures creating now dominance, now servience, now absorption, now extinction in the process. In the case of the Carthaginian Queen, her realm is saved from a foreign consort and possible resultant Greek domination by the machinations of a group of "sorcerers" - perhaps representative of cultural tradition and, hence, nationalist pride.

The meeting of cultures is vividly portrayed in costuming, dancing and music. Purcell, in typically Baroque fashion, included music intended to represent the exotic in his own musical language, much as Mozart represents "Turkish" music with cymbals and drums. Stern and Huysen have been bold enough to excise some of Purcell's exoticisms and replace them with some contemporary African dancing by members of the Free Flight Dance Company; and entirely appropriate music, from the marimba and drum combinations of Amapondo.

This might sound as if taking an irreverent liberty with a minor masterpiece; but, in truth, it mirrors the Baroque period's own casuistic approach to the inclusion, or alteration, of movements, dances, instrumentation and the like. (Much of Baroque music-making is probably more akin to contemporary jazz combos in this respect, than the often rigidly score-based realisations of Classical musicians.)

Cazalet's costuming is equally striking: the garments of Aeneas and his compatriots reflect the Baroque fashions of 1680 Europe and, accordingly, brings to mind our own early colonisers like Van Riebeeck or van der Stel. Dido and her courtiers, however, are costumed in a delightful Africanized version of Baroque, in vibrant colour and dramatic shape.

Stern's direction is unfussily assured and tells the admittedly simple tale in unambiguous fashion. This allows one to concentrate on the musical aspects and their manifestations in singing and dancing.

Mngoma is suitably regal as the Queen, a dignified ruler who is, nevertheless, an ardent woman. Her celebrated lament, "When I am laid in earth", was hauntingly delivered and attained the required status as the dramatic highpoint of the work. Opposite her as Aeneas, Liebl started rather tentatively but warmed into a sympathetic character of smoothly lyric baritone.

The two main supporting roles were sung by Kerrison, a secure and musical Belinda (Dido's lady in waiting); and Mene as the sorceress, who demonstrated continuing difficulty in maintaining a focussed intonation. As the Sailor, tenor Ellis was effective and Ainslie's counter-tenor provided the appropriate timbre in the role of the apparition.

The choreography was a continuing source of interest - even fascination. Blank has

provided a varied dancing presence, from the sinewy peripheral suggestion of an African milieu to the set pieces demonstrating ritual or celebratory dancing. In combination with Dizu Plaatjies's Amaondo players, this element was a delightfully apt innovation.

Finally, however, the sine qua non of the production, the delightful realization of the score. Huyssen has telling insights into Baroque music and performance practice and has created a "semi-authentic" account of the score, employing period instruments for the continuo - cello, harpsichord, lute and chitarrone. (The lovely sound of the latter, alone, makes this production worth a visit.) To this are added a group of four string players. A small, but surprisingly powerful, ensemble.

Huyssen himself directs from his position as cellist, a circumstance which mostly worked extremely well but which did occasionally limit active direction. And the absence of cello in the choruses (which Huyssen conducted) was noticeable. The ad hoc chorus, trained by Vetta Wise, perform admirably but could improve diction, and hence unanimity, in individual episodes.

In conclusion, I urge all opera - and indeed theatre - aficionados to see this production. It demonstrates graphically what can be done to "Africanise" art forms without being either patronizing or historically illiterate.

Deon Irish

APPENDIX B

Amarantha

- Allison, J. 2002. Rajna. *BBC music magazine*. 11(3): 94.
- Brommert, B. 2000. Rajna's opera finally ready after 40 years, *The Cape Argus*: 2, November 17.
- Fourie, C. 2000. New opera off to an uneven and inaudible start, *The Cape Argus*: 2, November 28.
- Irish, D. 2000. Gripping opera has its première, *The Cape Times*: 10, November 29.
- Kooij, P. 2000. Mooi musiek, maar opera kry gemengde ontvangs, *Die Burger*: 11, November 27.
- Rajna, T. 1992. *Amarantha* (manuscript): II-IV.
- Smith, B. 2001. South Africa deep south transfer, *Opera*. 48: 358-360.
- Willoughby, G. 2000. A crazy obsession, *Mail & Guardian*: 3, December 1-7.

Valley Song

- Chisholm, F. 2005. Valley Song does Fugard proud, *The Cape Times*: 15, March 14.
- Fourie, C. 2005. Rural opera easy on the ear, *The Cape Argus*: 5, March 9.
- Irish, D. 2005. Struggling between play and opera: intriguing show fails to reach potential, *The Cape Times*: 11, March 10.
- Jordan, M. 2005. Opera. *Business Day*: 11, March 9.
- Kooij, P. 2003. Voorsmaak van Rajna-opera hét belofte, *Die Burger*: 8, February 25.
- Maas, G. 2005. Nuanses, patos en humor van Fugard behou in opera, *Die Burger*: 12, March 5.
- Maas, G. 2005. Opera 'Valley Song' moet gesien word, *Die Burger*: 10, March 7.
- Odendaal, T. 2005. 'Valley Song' verdien aandag, *Beeld Plus*: March 10. (See appendix B: 19)

OPERA

Amarantha; Stop all the Clocks; Four Early Songs; Three Hebrew Choruses
 Thomas Rajna (piano), Soloists of Cape Town Opera & UCT Opera School; St George's Singers/Barry Smith, Cape Town PO/Christopher Dowdeswell
Amarantha AR 011-2 (distr. +27 21 671 3937; amarec@iafrica.com)

128:28 mins (2 discs) £ £ £



Those with long memories or good record collections will recall the Hungarian-born Thomas Rajna's

career in London during the Fifties and Sixties, during which time he made important recordings of piano music by Stravinsky and Granados, among others. Since 1970 he has been one of South Africa's leading pianists and composers, though it was not until two years ago that his first opera, *Amarantha*, reached the stage. Based on a short story by the American author Wilbur Daniel Steele, it is set in Thirties Carolina, where Humble Jewett, a Peter Grimes-like figure, abducts the simple country girl Amarantha. The live recording is less than ideal, but it captures the moody claustrophobia of the piece and shows how Rajna's sinewy music drives the action along – a virtue many new operas lack. The mezzo Veramarie Meyer and baritone Brad Liebl in the two central roles are both strong.

Liebl is accompanied by the composer himself in an Auden cycle, *Stop all the Clocks*, the soprano Andrea Catzel joins Rajna for his *Four Early Songs* and Barry Smith conducts the St George's Singers in *Three Hebrew Choruses*, all music that deserves wider currency. *John Allison*

PERFORMANCE

★★★★

SOUND

★★★

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Rajna's opera finally ready after 40 years

BEVERLEY BROMMERT

As much as composer Thomas Rajna loves and respects the works of Verdi and Puccini, he strongly believes that the operatic repertoire needs to be expanded by new material and a contemporary style of writing.

Which is as good a reason as any to create an opera oneself ... and Rajna has done just that: his *Amarantha* will have three performances at the Nico this month, thanks to a grant from the National Arts Council.

The genesis of this opera has been remarkably long, starting 40 years ago when the composer came across a powerful short story by W D Steele and thought: "This would make a wonderful opera!"

Rajna admits with a wry smile that what finally "got him going" was embarrassment at the variety of excuses he kept producing over the years when people asked him: "And when will your opera be ready?"

In 1991 he decided that procrastination had gone on long enough, and rented a cottage in Simon's Town to address the stern task of composing without the distractions attendant on home life.

He called his family once a day

to keep in touch; other than that, he says, "there was nothing but the sea and the wind for company; it was very therapeutic".

He spent six months there, and completed the work in 1995.

Where did he start on this ambitious undertaking?

"The first thing to do was condense the sprawling text of Steele's story into a libretto. Once that had been restructured, I tackled the mood of the piece. It's like laying the tracks for a train, to set the engine moving in the right direction. Ultimately you have a tightly-knit structure of mood, words, and music."

What about the music?

Rajna reflects before replying. "I would describe it as contemporary lyricism. My music for *Amarantha* is allusive and pervasive, there are no leitmotifs, just motifs that are not tied to any specific character or place. I've kept it supple and transferable."

He prefers to think of his work as "music theatre" rather than conventional opera.

"What it is not," he says firmly, "is a re-hash of 18th and 19th century styles. It is essentially expressive, which suits the dramatic storyline. Melody and rhythm are important, yes, but the words are also important. That is why the performers are



Contemporary style: Thomas Rajna directs Jazzart Dance Theatre's Lavern Botha in the role of Blossom

first being coached as if it were a play they're acting without music and song. The narrative must be coherent."

He has nothing but praise for the direction the performers (Brad Liebl and Veramarie Meyer) are receiving from Angelo Gobbato.

"Rehearsals are going very well," he beams. Since he came to our interview direct from a rehearsal, this remark had the ring of conviction.

"This is the first time I've worked with Angelo, and I'm very impressed by his thoroughness. He makes sure the performers

know what they're doing and why. He doesn't just tell them, 'Do this' or 'Do that'. He sees to it that they understand, which makes them confident."

In the modern idiom, Rajna has dispensed with a chorus ("It wouldn't be appropriate"). The characters of *Amarantha* are individuals, even when they appear in groups.

"I am curious to see how Cape Town audiences will react to this opera," says Rajna. "They're generally conservative ... but I feel the timing is right now for something new."

Perhaps he is right.

New opera off to an uneven and inaudible start

The National Arts Council, together with the other sponsors, need to be congratulated on their courage in financing a production of a new opera, especially one that is not even remotely connected to Africa in any way.

The plot is based on a short story by DW Steele, dealing with an English teacher in America (an oxymoron?) who, for reasons that unfold during the opera, lost his sanity and murdered his principal and a female student.

The libretto, including unnecessary blasphemous expletives, was written by Thomas Rajna.

The music is quite accessible and well crafted, even though there are strong discords. The orchestration makes optimum use of a smallish orchestra, which includes a harp and a sizeable brass section. Strings carry the bulk of the melodic and harmonic responsibility.

Much of the writing is a meandering of seething intense emotion, desperately seeking resolution. More musical variation in a work of dark intrigue would have been welcome.

An interesting facet of the composition is the use of musical flashbacks of Jewett's words to the country girl in the last scene. These are achieved by making use of speakers.

Their impact was paradoxically portrayed on stage by the confused, yet awakened girl.

A major negative factor is the structure of the composition. It consists of seven scenes, each requiring a scene change. These

AMARANTHA

Reviewer: **Carl Fourie**

MUSIC, LIBRETTO: Thomas Rajna
DIRECTOR: Angelo Gobbiato, for Cape Town Opera

CONDUCTOR: Christopher Dowdeswell, with Cape Town Opera Orchestra

SOLOISTS: Veramarie Meyer, Brad Liebl, Heste-Marie White, Derick Ellis

WHERE: Nico Theatre, tomorrow and Thursday

changes are made behind a black screen. The first four scenes are also relatively short. The result is that the dramatic tension is broken too often to keep one's attention.

Furthermore, within the scenes are stretches of music without song that are a nightmare for a director to productively employ.

The audience does not wait with bated breath for the next stilted piece of drama to occur. Perhaps the composition still needs a bit of editing.

The most successful scenes are the last two. They are the longest and also require minimal time for change. Thus one's attention is sustained.

Scene six is also the only scene where, although brief, some much needed comic relief in the form of Farmer Wyker is provided. The ensuing climax is all the more dramatic as a consequence.

The orchestra under Christopher Dowdeswell played well. But herein too lies a problem: most of the singers are young and fairly



Amarantha: Veramarie Meyer sings the title role

inexperienced. They were drowned out for most of the time. Even a seasoned performer like Brad Liebl battled to make himself heard.

Why were surtitles used when the opera is sung in English? Maybe it was to interpret the American dialects; maybe it was because it was known that the singers would be drowned out; maybe it was because of poor diction all round ...

Various technical problems – surtitles, screens, dull background sound effects – plagued this first performance too, but these can be resolved during the remaining part of the run.

Liebl (baritone) deserves full credit for a wonderful portrayal of the complex, deranged murderer, Jewett. His dramatic interpretation never let up, even in those songless stretches. Vocally, he was strong and sang with a clear, focused tone.

Amarantha (mezzo-soprano) was sung by Veramarie Meyer. She is a good actress. Vocally, her

role is not the most melodic, although the final scene is quite musically passionate. She sang with a good understanding of the musical direction and deserved the positive reception she received.

The remaining two larger roles were sung by Heste-Marie White (the mother, alto) and Derick Ellis (the fiance, baritone).

As with the smaller roles, they were often inaudible. When on occasion they were heard, their diction was unimpressive. But they are students, and experience such as performing in this opera can only do them good.

White was vocally unsuited to her role. She struggled to sing those deep tones with a clear voice. And Ellis needs to work on projection. He often sang with his head pointing down, which takes the sound nowhere.

The audience of opening night was a who's who of Cape Town's musical world. It would be interesting to know how they experienced this world premiere.

SUCCESS FOR RAJNA

Gripping opera has its première

AMARANTHA — Opera by Thomas Rajna. With Brad Liebl, Veramarie Meyer, Derick Ellis, Stephan le Roux, Heste-Marie White. Conducted by Christopher Dowdeswell, directed by Angelo Gobbato, designed by Michael Mitchell, lighting by Kobus Rossouw. At Nico until tomorrow. **DEON IRISH** reviews.

AMARANTHA, an opera by Cape Town composer Thomas Rajna, had its première in the Nico theatre on Saturday night before an enthusiastic audience.

Budapest-born Rajna, a member of the UCT College of Music since 1970, has been a significant contributor to the musical fabric of Cape Town, both as performer and composer.

It is accordingly entirely fitting that this work should have been premiered in the city which he has made his home.

The opera — or, as the composer prefers, music drama — is set in the American South of the depression years and features a cast of stock small-town characters.

Of these, the two most important are Amarantha (Meyer), the unattached daughter of a widowed mother, and her suitor, Ruby Herter (Ellis), both rural-community characters seemingly condemned by locality and circumstance to a prevailing lifestyle and to each other.

A homicidal ex-teacher, who killed the school headmaster and viciously assaulted a school girl, escapes from a nearby institution to which he has been committed and arrives at Amarantha's farm.

His deranged mind immediately develops an adulation for

The plot deals with the interaction between them, the eventual resolution of the abduction and the residual effect of the experience on Amarantha.

I won't reveal more of the plot here: it is tautly written and deserves to be experienced fresh. In fact, I would advise opera-goers not to read the synopsis beforehand, but simply to watch the drama unfold.

It's a bit of a thriller the effect of which, like most examples of the genre, is heightened by surprise.

The score is lushly conceived, Rajna obtaining surprisingly full sonorities from a moderately sized orchestra.

the wind writing is striking in its prominence and effectiveness. Rajna is, of course, an assured orchestrator; but I cannot recall another work in which the woodwinds play so dominant a role.

For the rest, the use of musical interludes — after the example of Britten — is most effective and affords opportunity for some symphonically-conceived passages.

Liebl, with his stronger projection and greater experience, obviously fares best in this regard, creating a credible and even sympathetic character from the tortured Humble Jewett.

Liebl's portrayal was consistently engrossing and a little more care in accompanimental levels would probably iron out the problems.

Meyer brings off the taxing title role in genuinely convincing manner and also sings with distinction; but her voice does not have the power required and Dowdeswell simply must favour her in this regard.

Both Ellis, the suitor, and Le Roux, as a neighbouring farmer, sing and perform to telling effect. The several lesser roles were all adequately portrayed.

The sets are effective and demonstrate how much can be achieved in the modern theatre with a good lighting plan. Costuming is quietly appropriate.

Dowdeswell has achieved much in bringing a new and complex score to life.

However, as with all things new, the pitfalls and remedies need to be sorted out.

Still, the evening was gripping and the opera a more than welcome addition to the growing body of South African stage works.

Mooi musiek, maar opera kry gemengde ontvangs

PIETER KOONJ

AMARANTHA, 'n opera in sewe tonele deur Thomas Rajna. Met soliste van Kaapstad Opera, Denidex Opera-ateljé en die Universiteit van Kaapstad se Operaskool. Die Kaapstad Opera orkes met Christopher Dowdeswell as dirigent. Ontwerp deur Michael Mitchell. Regie: Angelo Gobbato. In die Nico-Teater.

Die wereld-première van Thomas Rajna se dramatiese opera *Amarantha* het Saterdagmiddag gemengde reaksie van die gehoor gekry. 'n Groep operagangers was baie geesdriftig met luide byval en "bravo's" terwyl 'n groter deel van die gehoor nie meer as hoflike applous kon bemeester af.

Terloops: die saal was uitverkoop, maar tog net half vol – seker deels weens komplimentêre kaartjies wat nie benut is nie.

Thomas Rajna is in Boedapest gebore en getoë, maar woon die afgelope dertig jaar in Kaapstad. Sy nuwe opera of "musiekteater" is 'n eenbedryf wat in sewe tonele verdeel is. Die libretto wat ook deur die komponis geskryf is, is gebaseer op 'n kortverhaal deur die Amerikaanse skry-

wer W.D. Steele.

Dit vertel van die eenvoudige plaasmeisie Amarantha wat die fokus word van die ontsnapte, versteurde moordenaar Humble Jewett se verlange na liefde, skoonheid en verlossing. Hierdie skrikwekkende en bloedige ervaring ontstig, maar verryk terselfdertyd op vreemde wyse Amarantha se vervelige bestaan.

Die opera word in Engels gesing. Die komponis, die dirigent en die regisseur moes geweet het dat iets drasties verkeerd is wanneer Engel se borskifte by 'n opera in Engels nodig is. Die orkesklank was veels te prominent vir die sangers en soms kon hulle beswaarlik gehoor word wat nog te se van verstaan word.

Die orkestrasie is kleurvol, dramaties en ryk, maar het die vokale lyne oorweldig. Daarby het die jong stemme van die meeste sangers nie genoeg volume krag gehad nie. Die dirigent Christopher Dowdeswell het die komplekse orkespartituur baie goed vertolk, maar gefaal met die balans tussen die orkes en die sangers.

Die musiek is dramaties en soms pragtige uitdrukkingsvol. Die melodieë is eietjds-liries en die ritmes interessant en sterk wisselend.

Die teks is egter dikwels alledaags

en onpoëties en het inderdaad afbreuk aan die intense gevoelsatmosfeer van die musiek gedoen.

Angelo Gobbato se regie was sinvol en met sy gebruiklike aardse aanslag af en toe. Saam met Michael Mitchell se treffende, maar enigszins lendeiam dekorstelle asook Kobus Rossouw se belyfing het dit vir dramatiese visuele effekte gesorg.

Brad Liebl het die rol van die ontsnapte en versteurde Humble Jewett met intensiteit en groot oorgawe vertolk. Sy stem is sterk en hy het die meeste sukses van al die sangers gehad om ho die orkes gehoor te word. Hy het Jewett se karakter laat lewe en kon selfs simpatie vir hierdie versteurde moordenaar wek.

As Amarantha het Veramarie Meyer ook baie goed gevaar. Sy het ook die vermoë om die luisteraar by haar personisie se skrikwekkende ervaring te betrek en te laat meelee.

Derick Ellis, as die verloofde, en Hesté-Marie White, as die moeder, het saam met die ander sangers in kleiner rolle goed geïntegreerde en afgeronde sang en spel gelewer.

Die breuk in borskifte toe die sang onhoorbaar agter die toe gordyn was en die deurmekaarspul daarna sal hopelik met die volgende opvoerings uitgestryk wees.



Brad Liebl en Veramarie Meyer in *Amarantha*.

NOTE BY THE COMPOSER

December 1992
Froggy Pond, Simon's Town
False Bay.

The libretto, which I have adapted myself, is based on a short story by the American author, Wilbur Daniel Steele, entitled "How Beautiful with Shoes". The title is a quotation from the Song of Songs. My title is "Amarantha".

The action takes place in the present (circa 1930) in and around a Carolina farmhouse and deals with a lunatic who breaks out of a nearby asylum, where he has been kept for some years after he had run amok, killed his school principal and tried to strangle a girl student.

While the whole countryside is looking for him, he comes upon a young girl, Mary, known as Mare, at the farm. Mare's deaf mother is the only living soul who calls the girl by her unusual name, Amarantha.

The madman tries to abduct Mare but is quickly apprehended and overpowered by Ruby, Mare's fiance, and his mates. He is temporarily locked up in the local courthouse, but during the night he sets the place on fire, kills the guard and breaks out again. He stumbles upon Mare who is looking to see if the fire threatens her animals, and after dragging her through the surrounding woods, keeps her captive forcibly in an isolated farmhouse on a hill.

During the night it is gradually revealed that Jewett, the lunatic, is a morbidly sensitive person, with an overwhelming love for beauty and poetry. Through his ravings we learn that he was reprimanded severely by his principal for reciting and treating the Song of Songs as love poetry in his classes. It was the hypocrisy of this same principal, who on the quiet was busy trying to seduce one of the girl students, which finally had unhinged the man's fevered mind and led to his murderous attempts. But he tenderly and gently worships "Amarantha" through their night's vigil, only growing violent once when in a moment of delusion he takes her for the hated principal's schoolgirl paramour, Blossom.

After much raving he eventually falls asleep. They are found by the owner of the farmhouse, the madman is shot dead and the terrified girl is released from her ordeal.

But the exposure to the white-hot intensity of the man's passion for beauty, his jumbled bits of poetry and worship, his fierce hatred of sham and pretence have had a disturbing effect on the mind of this slow-witted, inarticulate, coarse country girl. She cannot get the glory and the word-music of some of the things the lunatic said to her out of her mind. "Is it only crazy folk ever say such things?" she wonders, hardly understanding her own turmoil.

When her down-to-earth, clod-hopper farmer fiance turns up, trying to comfort her in his usual rough-and-tumble manner, she thrusts him away with desperate revulsion.

On one level the action is full of suspense and drama. On another level it is a parable of the eternal struggle between repressive, hypocritical morality and the passion and free spirit of the creative mind that represents the indomitable force of life, the force which, when it is thwarted, breaks all bounds and destroys itself and those around it.

As soon as I had read this intensely dramatic story in an anthology of American short stories some thirty-five years ago, I was struck with its operatic possibilities and had the idea of setting it to music at the back of my mind ever since. The paperback, which contained the original story, has long since disintegrated, but I kept the precious handful of tattered pages, in case one day I found the strength and courage for the task. I eventually started work in July 1991 and the same year gained the sponsorship of the Foundation for the Creative Arts to complete the project.

Though the opera has an American setting, no attempt was made to give the music local colour. There is just a faint hint of square dance while Judge North, Old Haskins and Ruby occupy the stage in Scene III, and the action in Scene VI requires that the inebriated farmer, Wyker, sing a popular ditty of some sort while rolling home. For this purpose I used a tune known as "Brown's Ferry Blues".

Otherwise the music deals with the feelings and conflicts of the characters and I regard the work as a music drama. Consequently, while there are a number of extended monologues, the flow of the music is continuous and there are no formal arias or recitatives. The construction is symphonic, that is to say a few basic ideas undergo the process of development, extension and variation. The recurring musical ideas are not used in the "leit-motif" manner of Wagner. Thus they are not ascribed to persons or events, but stand for moods and atmosphere. Much of Jewett's music revolves around an obsessional phrase of a descending pattern of a semitone and a sixth, but when he goes into a poetic rapture, his music becomes transparent and tonal. The first of the two settings of "O Western Wind" in Scene V may sound like an old English folk song, but, while intending this effect, the tune is my own.

Music lovers will not be slow to recognise a couple of elements in my music, deliberately introduced as timeless, universal symbols. The first one is a series of rising, melancholy thirds, as at the beginning of the third act of Wagner's "Tristan", the most powerful expression of longing and doom of all times. When Jewett in Scene VI is under the delusion that he bears Christ's own martyrdom ("Take me down gently when you take me from the Tree"), the music approaches the outlines of the final mourning chorus of Bach's St John Passion and the sound of the tragic final cadence of the St Matthew Passion. (This music carries on into the orchestral interlude after the shooting of Jewett.) None of these elements are quoted literally, or are used as

"objets trouvés", like Mahler is in Berio's Sinfonia. They are absorbed into the texture and generate their power of association from within the structure.

In Steele's story Mare remains to the end the slow-witted, inarticulate country girl and, apart from a few involuntary outbursts, a passive arena, which the sexually repressed and deeply disturbed Jewett peoples with the symbolic female characters of his fevered imagination: the idealised love object, Amarantha, the hated trollop, Dirty Blossom, the longed-for last refuge and comfort, Mary, Mother of God. The havoc and change that these searing experiences wreak on the girl's mind are suggested by the author with masterly insight and economy by means of a few asides and fleeting thoughts of the girl. In the broader and less subtle parameters of an opera I found it became necessary for Mare to externalise her feelings. Consequently in the last scene (but only then) Mare does describe her inner development and despair over a life-style that suddenly had turned to ashes for her after her devastating encounter with a mind maddened by passion, beauty, hate and frustration. While her suddenly articulate self-analysis would have been uncharacteristic in the realistic context of the story, I felt that the terms of the opera demanded just such a final exposure and balancing-up of Mare's role in the general scheme.

The opera is scored for a medium-sized orchestra: double woodwind, 3 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, tuba, harp, celeste, timpani, percussion and strings. The action is set in seven scenes but only six stage sets of extreme simplicity are required. Here is a breakdown of the sequence:

- Scene 1 The yard of a Carolina farmstead
- Scene 2 The open countryside (hilly woodland)
- Scene 3 The parlour of the Doggett farmhouse with Mare's sleeping quarters in a curtained alcove to the right.
- Scene 4 In the open. A gabled barn in the background.
- Scene 5 A small sheltered thicket on the hill-side. (Drop scene)
- Scene 6 Parlour of Wyker's dilapidated farmhouse on Coward Hill.
- Scene 7 As in Scene 3.

Cape Town

Writing to a friend in 1926 about Cecil Gray's recently completed opera *Deirdre*, Peter Warlock commented somewhat extravagantly, '... it is certainly one of the most beautiful works that has been made in this country during the present century. But why do people write operas? There is no rottenner form in which to cast good music, nor one that so militates against the music's chance of being heard.' Over the years there must be many a composer who has echoed these sentiments, and no doubt Thomas Rajna, the Hungarian-born composer and pianist who has been resident in Cape Town for the past 30 years, had similar thoughts about his opera *Amarantha*. Composed between 1991 and 1994 it took a great deal of dogged determination on the part of the composer and others to see it premiered in Cape Town's NICO THEATRE (November 25).

Based on a short story by the American author D.W. Steele, it tells of a deranged schoolteacher's obsession for a simple country girl, his abduction of her, the local community's revulsion and revenge and the girl's final reaction. It moves swiftly in seven scenes (often with short orchestral interludes), the whole piece lasting some 90 minutes.

The libretto (by Rajna himself) reduces the story to its bare essentials yet retains the essential imagery and largely religious symbolism which draws on the biblical *Song of Songs* and a theme of love and redemption. In many ways there is something of *Peter Grimes* about the piece. In the end, despite her shattering ordeal, Amarantha looks back at her dull, monotonous life and the disturbing richness of the schoolteacher's passion.

Rajna describes his style as 'modern lyricism, expressive and dealing with emotions' and this was certainly evident in the passionate score. A large orchestra is employed and the sonorities are rich, sweeping over the listener in a through-composed, quasi-symphonic, rhapsodic manner. In fact it is here that the main problems of the performance lay. The strikingly evocative interludes were particularly effective, encapsulating as they did the tortured emotions of the characters, yet the sheer weight of the scoring often drowned the singers. To be fair, the combination of difficult acoustics and the somewhat exposed pit highlighted the problems, but at times a lighter accompaniment would have given some relief and made the singers' task that much easier. Nevertheless the climaxes, especially at the death of the schoolmaster, were suitably chilling.

The cast was made up largely of young and fairly inexperienced singers who rose nobly to the occasion and ensured that the opera made a sure musical and dramatic impact. Brad Liebl as Jewett, the deranged schoolteacher, gave an admirable performance with clear diction and an ability to project both his voice and the Angst of a complex character. Veramarie Meyer (Amarantha) acted with impressive conviction though her voice as yet lacks the sheer weight to ride an accompaniment of these proportions. Derick Ellis impressed as Ruby Herter, Amarantha's fiancée, and sterling support was given by those in the various minor roles. Angelo Gobatto's production had an easy flow and Christopher Dowdeswell ensured that the Cape Town Opera Orchestra played with persuasive advocacy.

BARRY SMITH



● The premiere of Thomas Rajna's *Amarantha* in Cape Town, with Brad Liebl as Jewett and Veramarie Meyer in the title role

A crazy obsession



Guy Willoughby
REVIEW OF THE WEEK



Madness and ardour: Veramarie Meyer as Amarantha with Brad Liebl as Humble Jewett.
PHOTOGRAPH: PAT BROMILOW-DOWNING

It is cause for rejoicing that a serious new operatic work by a composer of global reputation receives its premiere in South Africa and even more cause for celebration that the work in question is powerful, dark, and challenging.

Thomas Rajna's first opera — presented by Cape Town Opera and the University of Cape Town's opera school — is a contemporary musical feast, rendered by a formidable bevy of local talents.

Amarantha, based on an obscure short story by the equally obscure American writer WD Steele, tells a curious story of repressed desire and longing set in the Deep South of the Depression era. The eponymous heroine is an ill-educated farm girl known to everyone as Mary or "Mare" — appropriately, as she isn't much more than a comfortable unshod dobbie to her peers — whose actual name contains poetic ardours and potentialities far beyond the ken of this poor rural community.

Amarantha — the name a "whim", we are told, of her father's — is of Greek classical origin and comes down to us as the subject of Sir Richard Lovelace's graceful cavalier lyric "to Amarantha, that she would dishevel her hair". The homely Mare hides her oddly splendid handle in some embarrassment — until one day she meets, explosively, a man who grasps its history and mythic meaning.

Humble Jewett is a crazed ex-schoolteacher, whose obsessive belief in the power of art and beauty in a prosaic world fixates on the girl with the poetic name. Pursued by the entire county, Jewett takes "Amarantha" on a wild night's journey of discovery — and shatters her mundane world-view for ever.

The story has rich dramatic possibilities, and Rajna tells it with a rare combination of deft economy and great emotional range. His score exposes at the beginning a number of musical themes, broadly suggestive of longing or desire in conflict with darker forces, which are augmented, developed and refined throughout in symphonic rather than classic operatic style.

Eshewing the classical formula of set aria and recitative, with the orchestra chiefly present as accompaniment to the singers, Rajna makes the vocalists integral components of his musical structure — each voice one instrument among many.

Stage action is thus more important than words and the aural balance at the Nico of singers and orchestra is exactly right: neither dominates, both are equally weighted elements of composition. Those who complain of a lack of "hummable tunes" (overheard on opening night) miss the satisfying symphonic richness and complexity of the whole.

The two principal singers grasp Rajna's intention admirably: Brad Liebl is simply splendid as Humble Jewett, a raging, quavering presence who radiates both the character's madness and his visionary ardour. Veramarie Meyer is a moving foil for Liebl's well-judged intensity, bringing the right degree of pathos and vulnerability to the role. Most of the other singers, admittedly in rather thankless smaller parts, lack the experience to ground their parts sufficiently on stage.

The Cape Town Opera Orchestra, conducted with crisp precision by Christopher Dowdeswell, are in vigorous form and the entire performance — played against Michael Mitchell's brooding set — is a marvellously layered and subtle musical experience.

Rajna's haunting interweave of themes is so compelling, it's a wonder to rise after less than two hours and realise one has travelled an imaginative journey of truly epic proportions. *Amarantha* deserves to enter the repertoire — and not just the South African one either.

This is world-class opera, funded locally, exactly where it should be: right here. Go and see it.

Amarantha is at the Nico Opera House until December 8

The Voice of the Nation

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Critic's Corner

Valley Song does Fugard proud - Fiona Chisholm

Librettist Guy Willoughby and composer Thomas Rajna have truly done Athol Fugard proud.

By means of deft expansion of his two-hander introducing more characters, music and action, they have turned his static play into an opera with heart and soul, light and shade and even a little bit of farce

Cape Town Opera's opening performance on Saturday March 5 at the Spier amphitheatre outside Stellenbosch, ended in triumph with the appreciative audience rising spontaneously to its feet after this entertaining and proudly South African musical event.

Valley Song - the Opera is convincingly acted by a cast with the right looks and personalities for their roles. Singing was excellent - Rajna's music proving to be neither dissonant nor derivative yet with enough individuality to make it interesting, listenable and singable.

Graham Scott conducting the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra, gave good support to the cast, maintaining the delicate balance between voices and musicians. In this he was helped by the sensible decision to amplify lightly the singers, thus offsetting the loss of sound in the open-air venue.

The setting of the opera is the small Karoo town of Nieu-Bethesda, which Fugard also used for *The Road to Mecca*. At times you feel you are almost there too, watching the locals in their Sunday best at church, waiting for the rains to plant those pumpkin seeds, and like the leading character Veronica, finding village life claustrophobic and longing to escape to the big wide world of Johannesburg.

Angela Kerrison is outstanding as the 17-year-old Veronica Jonkers. She reveals as she did as Violetta and the Priestess Leila in *The Pearl Fishers*, that she's a consummate young actress and singer.

Passionate and fiery, youthful and energetic, she moves like an exuberant and slightly wild country teenager, yet when she sings reveals her training, musicality and an effortless soprano voice.

Veronica's ambitions probably reflect Kerrison's own dreams though in a different genre. Veronica also wants to become a successful singer - in pop. She represents the many hopefuls from disadvantaged communities who saw the 1994 elections as the lifting of barriers, the chance of a new and more fulfilling life

Her stooped and wizened grandfather Buks is the antithesis. Ronnie Thys, aging himself by about 20 years, aptly portrays the 'old school' of coloured man - upright, deferential, almost cringing to the Whiteman [Derrick Ellis], whom he still calls baas.

Terrified of change and of losing his land, Buks wants nothing more than the right to grow vegetables on the farm he and his family have rented for years but could never own. He's also implacably set against his beloved granddaughter going away on the railway bus to Johannesburg, an act her mother Caroline did in secret, and never returned.

The clash between the bold young girl and the frightened old man is the core of the story, but their deep affection is always there. One of the most beautiful moments is when she cradles the head of her distraught grandfather in her lap and croons softly a song about Oupa and Veronica.

Thomas Rajna's first opera *Amarantha* was based on more dramatic material, but its stage

presentation at Artscape in 2000, was hampered by seven different changes of scene and resultant loss of continuity.

This time round the story unfolds over 11 scenes, but director Stephen Stead always maintains the flow and the pace but it is strange that so much of the action takes place on the right hand side of the stage in front of Greg King's set design of a simple, whitewashed labourer's cottage built.

This cottage is built on a revolving dias and at the flick of a switch, the walls turn and we're suddenly inside a church or the post office where the hilarious clash of wills takes place between the white Afrikaans Brigadier [Brad Liebl in good form] and the indignant postmistress Mrs Oliphant [Christina Farr].

In spite of all his demands and shouting, she sticks to her guns that the post office is closed and refuses to be brown-beaten by the belligerent white man. The chorus of villagers, whose presence and voices added so much to the way the opera is fleshed out, watch the events with delight.

Another lively scene - perhaps the best in the opera - takes place inside Mrs Jooste's house where this boozy old crow is watching a TV programme in which a pop star is performing a raunchy number in a variety show.

Veronica, perched on an applebox outside the window, is mimicking the singer on the TV screen. Suddenly with a flash of red and purple smoke, the real live dazzling figure of Nokrismei Skotz appears in the flesh at the door of Mrs Jooste's house to sing 'Nature Boy', while Veronica joins in the act with her own version of it. This split-scene was brilliant.

In the role of The Whitman, Derrick Ellis added years and weight to his youthful appearance to convey a disillusioned and burnt out sixty-plus writer with one dream left. This is to buy the Jonkers land and grow things. But he has a good heart as well as a good strong voice. His dreams come true yet not at the expense of Buks.

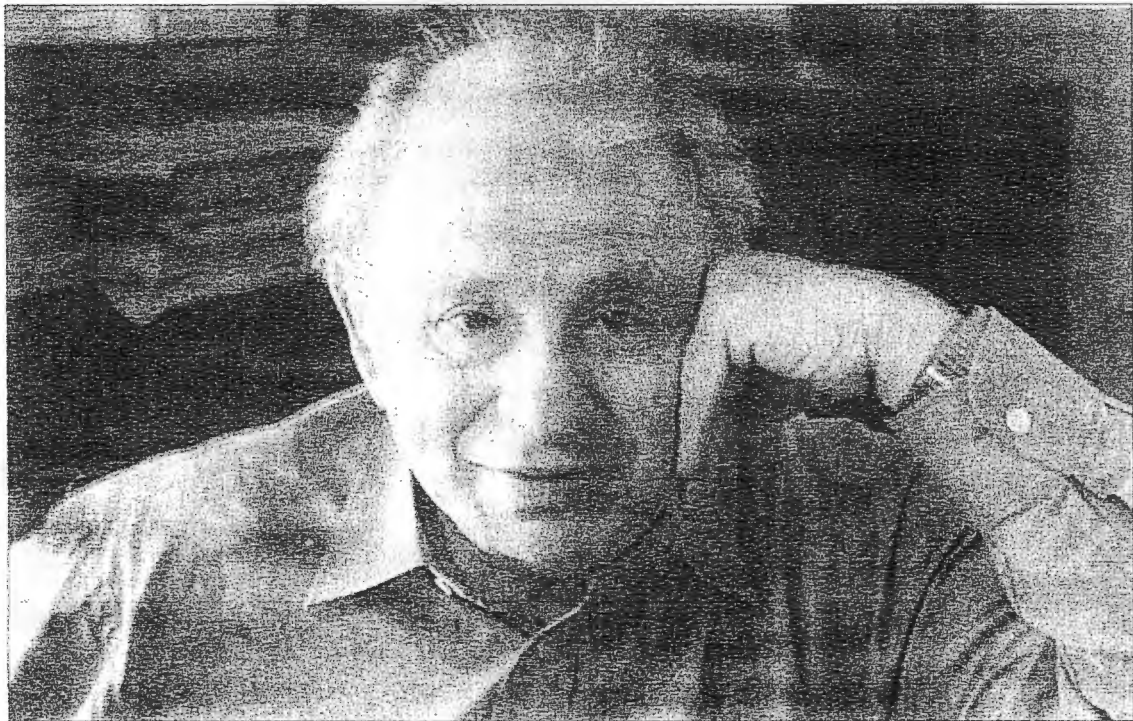
The opera is sung in English without the help of surtitles [sometimes necessary even in English!] but the diction is first class, both in the chunks of Fugard spoken text, which Willoughby has retained, and during the singing.

The second half needs tightening, even a trim as there is too much repetition of the story. Maybe it was the chilly wind, which blew up towards the end of the night, but the opera began dragging its feet. Happily events were suddenly wrapped up before we and the opera, grew cold. The standing ovation got the circulation, and the good mood, going again
Ends

CAPE TIMES
FRIDAY, MARCH 4, 2005

OPERA

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A WAY WITH NOTES: Thomas Rajna has been working on *Valley Song* for two-and-a-half years, both as a composer and fundraiser.

Rural opera easy on the ear

THOMAS RAJNA'S *Valley Song* has premiered at Spier. The past decade has seen wonderful local works premiered, like Temming's *Enoch*, *Prophet of God* (a magnificent portrayal of African folklore), Van Dijk's *earthliving* (the production didn't do it for me, but the work itself was worthwhile) and Van Dijk's reworking of Verdi's *Macbeth*, stupendously directed by Brett Bailey.

My wish is to have Temming's *Buchland* and Hofmeyr's *House of Usher* still performed in Cape Town. Why should Pretoria have all the fun?

But the perennial problem with any new composition the size of an opera is financing - getting enough of it to produce the work, and then hopefully making something out of it to warrant future gambles on similar productions. Which is where Cape Town audience responsibility comes in.

Valley Song is a typical case in point where the composer had to go cap in hand to ensure the financial viability of the work. Well done to Spier Arts Trust for its financial contribution and for providing the platform for the production of this work.

The plot centres on a youthful Veronica, growing up as a traditional farm labourer's child. Her dream is to become a singer in the big city. But she is faced with not the oppression of a past legal system, but the narrow prejudices and expectations of rural folk, specifically her grandfather.

The libretto has been written by Guy Willoughby, after Athol Fugard's play of the same title.

Willoughby and Rajna have succeeded in writing an opera

VALLEY SONG
Reviewer: Carl Fourie
Director: Stephen Stead
Soloists: Angela Kerrison, Ronald Theys, Derrick Ellis
Venue: Spier Amphitheatre, until Saturday

.....
 which is both entertaining and quite accessible to the masses, not just the operatic initiated. It also succeeded in obviously increasing the percentage of people of colour in the audience.

Rajna has incorporated several snippets of well-known arias, hymns and even swing tunes. Styles range from operatic to militaristic and blues.

The orchestral writing is essentially founded on strings - harmonies are discordant while melodies are supple. This creates the emotional tension of a young girl discontented with her lot, in an environment that others by and large were quite happy to perpetuate.

I thought Rajna succeeded best in the more tender moments, when strings are complimented by a forlorn flute melody, or a sinuous clarinet winding its way through a mesh of frictional strings.

But I was not always convinced of a natural flow in the rhythm of the text. Many sections were written one-note-per-syllable style, resulting in a pedantic pace, rather than a more natural singing style.

And while repetition in opera is acceptable, some examples come across as anachronistic rather than functional in terms of highlighting important aspects of the story or the emotions involved.



Traditional outlook: Ronald Theys as Oupa in *Valley Song*

Greg King's designs are simple and purposeful, based on a revolving building that can be used from various angles for different scenes: home, lounge, church and post office.

On opening night conductor Graham Scott led the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra in a worthy reading of Rajna's score.

Director Stephen Stead makes good use of stage space. The cast was relatively small, yet the stage never looked bare. Crowd scenes in particular worked well.

John Davids trained the Comart Choristers, whose numbers were swelled with numerous ad hoc members joining their ranks. They sang adequately, but individual

voices could be heard standing out. This should not be evident in chorus work, where the end product should be a team-created sound.

Of the three main singers, Derrick Ellis (tenor) impresses the most. Ellis has come a long way in his career, and sings the role of Whiteman with confidence and understanding. His voice is powerful and has blossomed into a most pleasing tone.

Angela Kerrison (soprano) takes the role of Veronica. She sings well, but fails to impress on sustained high notes. Somehow the expected spark we have come to expect from her did not happen on opening night.

The role of Oupa is taken by Ronnie Theys (baritone). Theys has an impressive history of operatic achievements and contributions over 30 years. Yet he stumbles over several speaking lines, and has lost some of the warmth of his voice in especially his bottom register.

Cameo appearances are generally sung well: Christina Farr (Mrs Oliphant), Brad Liebl (brigadier), and Nokrismesi Skota (celebrity singer) impress the most.

All in all, the work was well received. Musically, it comfortably falls on the ear. Historically, it captures the social dynamics of rural communities that have as yet not been dealt with in opera.

Emotionally, it seeks to involve us in the lives of ordinary people caught up in ordinary situations from which they dream to escape.

A final comment: I assume that the microphones were used for recording purposes, and not amplification. After all, opera and electronic amplification should, by definition, be mutually exclusive.

Intriguing show fails to reach potential

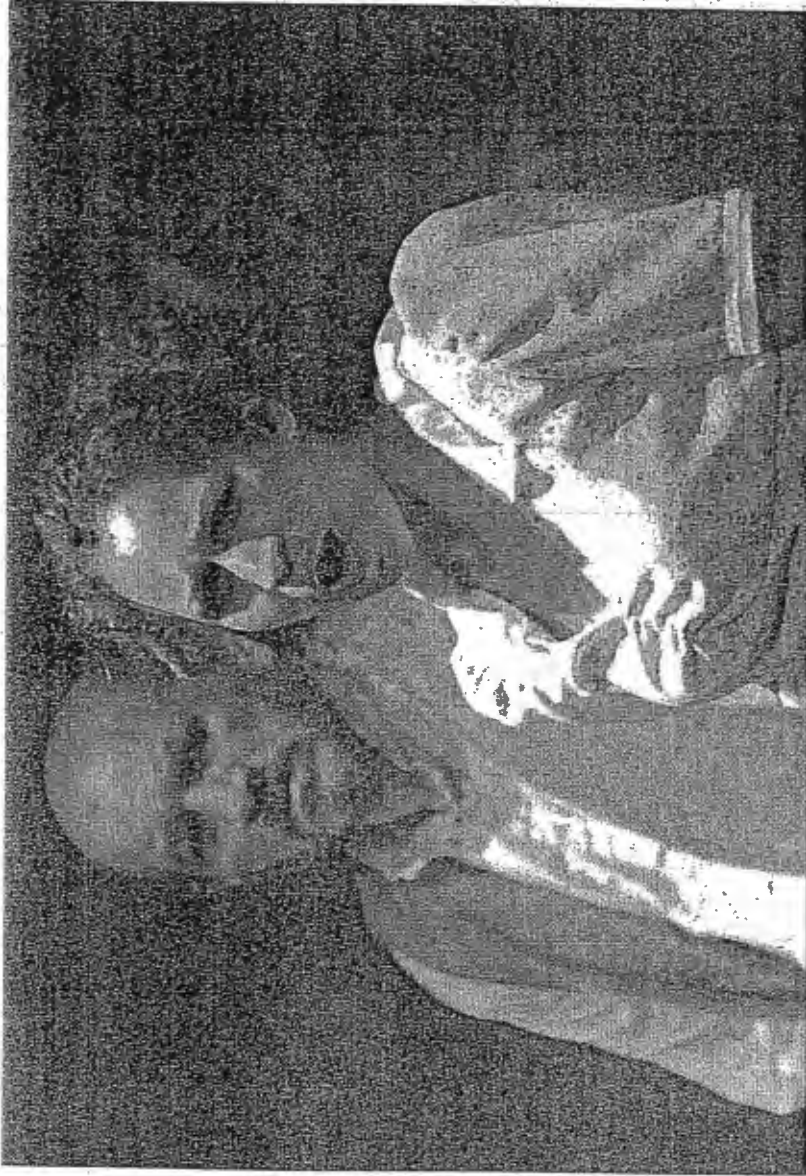
SPIER OPERA FESTIVAL: Rajna's **VALLEY SONG**, with Angela Kerrison, Ronnie Theys, Derrick Ellis, Brad Liebl, GPO and CT Opera Chorus conducted by Graham Scott, directed by Stephen Stead, designed by Greg King. At Spier until 12 March. **DEON IRISH** reviews

AS RECORDED in the programme note, Nedbank has sponsored this operatic version of Athol Fugard's play, *Valley Song*, composed by Cape Town composer Thomas Rajna to an adapted libretto by Guy Willoughby. And that is a most laudable thing, regardless of outcome.

The choice of this play for an opera libretto is, seemingly, ideal: it's the story of a Karoo girl, whose apparently constricted destiny in a deprived, agricultural community is increasingly made unbearable by her innate singing talent. At first bluish, a perfect choice for an opera libretto. After all, why merely act out what one can actually sing, to real music?

But, therein lies the rub. Whereas, in the play version, we are never quite sure whether Veronica's talent is merely of a degree sufficient to impress an agricultural community with florid descants in communal hymn-singing and self-improvised, hardly insightful commentaries on aspects of village life; in the opera, her voice and her songs are heard, and we are made judges of whether her indwelling talent is, or is not, of more than self-aggrandising quality.

Unfortunately, she turns out to be a big bore. And the main reason that she is a big bore, is that the libretto is a big bore. South Africa has become the most didactic place on God's earth: even the most avowed atheist cannot avoid being preached at, at every eventuality. And here it comes again: a work which resembles a sermon in production, a veritable workshop of



ADEPT: Ronnie Theys as Buks and Angela Kerrison as Veronica in *Valley Song*. The Opera at Spier.

do-goodisms, yoked to high art in a combination that should cause consternation in any self-respecting artistic environment.

Where has South Africa gone so horribly wrong, that we accept this sort of television-derived, shallow moralism as constituting a reasonable facsimile of High Art?

Guy Willoughby appears to have been so cowed by the stature of the Author of the Play, as to have been inhibited from pruning the work down to operatic size with the required ruthlessness; in the result, the final prod-

uct remains hopelessly over-written, with almost nothing required of the music that has not already been spelt out in frequently implausible dialogue. This flaw has, inevitably, infected the score, for - much as composers hate to admit it - good operas are generally tied up to good libretti. (There are, of course, exceptions to this rule; but that is not something which need concern us here). Rajna, perforce, dealt with what he had at hand, and there is no need to speculate what might have been had the material been better. Rajna's score is inventive and

striving for art song status) assigned to

generally fluent, demonstrating influences which may be traced back to Prokofiev, Gershwin, Copland, Bernstein and Britten. This is not to be understood in an unduly critical way: rather that orchestral or stylistic elements in the score call to mind similar employment in the writings of these composers.

But his writing for voice (which is, after all, central to the operatic endeavour) is not of uniform quality: perhaps to underline her status as a singer, the songs (they are not really arias, hardly striving for art song status) assigned to

the central character (beautifully portrayed by an increasingly adept Kerrison) appeared to have a lyricism and fluency not found in those of the others. Apart from these elements, the score has two hymn settings, both representing the village congregation in song: of the two, the second (an evocative setting of the Old 100th) deserves to attain a wider currency.

The other intriguing element is a taste of something full of inventive promise, but which is not developed further: there is a scene in which Veronica watches a television talent show, in which a contestant sings *Nature Boy*. The stage is split, with the contestant present and singing on one side, while appearing on the television set on the other, and Veronica to indulge in a duet with the television portrayal. It was the most effective moment of the production.

As her grandfather, Theys struggled with the improbable dialogue of his rather one-dimensional character, but created a credible enough Karoo man. Ellis had a harder task to fill out a character which, in truth, is almost vapid beyond endurance. Rajna has given him an attractive enough "big tune" song; but that is hardly enough to make his responses to unfolding events an authentic expression of character development.

Some of the small roles are delightful and the chorus is effectively employed. Scott conducts with authority and obtains good playing from the CPO. The composer can undoubtedly be gratified with this first interpretation of his score.

Still, in the end, it is a work which intrigued because of its as yet not quite attained possibilities. I hope that this production will serve as opportunity to edit and refine an endeavour which has, as yet, still to make it across the divide between play and opera.

Arts & Leisure

OPERA

OPERA makes us feel and believe in passion through music. Everything in the plot-line and characterisation has to be larger than life. More is more, for its extraordinary power and range of pathos lies in the dramatisation of confrontation. Theatre, on the other hand, makes us feel and believe in passion through the complex mingling of spiritual quest and philosophical argument in poetry and prose. Its plot-line has ordinary people doing extraordinary things in ordinary ways.

To meld these separate energies and satisfactions, so that musical subtlety matches literary subtlety, is extremely difficult.

Now, in **VALLEY SONG — THE OPERA** (Spier Amphitheatre, Stellenbosch), Guy Willoughby as librettist tackles the rural themes and unresolved problems of Athol Fugard's two-hander and expands it into a two-act opera with nine singing roles and accompanying chorus. The score — layered to incorporate a contemporary pop number, church hymns, hoere tiekiedraai and the 1940 popular hit, Nature Boy — is composed by Thomas Rajna.

So what you see and hear unfolding in front of you is something recognisable. Tenant farmer Abraam Jonkers (Ronnie Theys) is depressed at the thought of losing his rented land, as well as his granddaughter, Veronica (Angela Kerrison), who watches Tomorrow's Stars on television and yearns to be a pop star in Johannesburg. Theys acts with dignity and economy of gesture, his voice the embodiment of warmth and tenderness. Kerrison belts it out, without awareness of light or shade, but she is confidently high-spirited.

Yet there are no leitmotifs, or quartets in close harmony. Instead there are jolly references to growing vegetables and living your dream. Call it Oklahoma! out of Nieu Bethesda. It deserves to be seen for it gives meaning to the

dynamics of an exhausted society and to the age-old battle between generations.

There are performances on March 8, 10 and 12. Book at the Spier Box Office (021) 809-1177.

Mary Jordan

021-809-1177



www.spierarts.org.za

Voorsmaak van Rajna-opera het belofte

PIETER KOOIJ

OPERA: *Valley Song*, 'n lesing-demonstrasie van Thomas Rajna se opera in wording. Met Guy Willoughby, Melanie Scholtz, Brad Liebl, Ronnie Theys en lede van die ComArt Choristers. Klavier: Thomas Rajna. In die konferensiesentrum van die Spier-landgoed naby Stellenbosch.

ATHOL FUGARD se toneelstuk *Valley Song*, wat tot 1 Maart in die Baxter-ateljee opgevoer word, is deur Guy Willoughby omgeskep in 'n libretto vir die Hongaars-Kaapse komponis Thomas Rajna. Dit is die eerste Fugard-stuk wat 'n opera word.

Sondagaand is 13 uittreksels hieruit uitgevoer. Willoughby het met 'n uitstekende lesing die agtergrond van die opera geskets en daarna elke toneel soos dit verloop het, verder toegelig. Sy libretto toon veral 'n mooi poëtiese inslag by die liriese nommers.

Soos die van Rajna se vorige opera, *Amarantha*, wat in November 2000 in Kaapstad die eerste keer opgevoer is, is die musiek van *Valley Song* eietyds-liries met dikwels energieke ritmiese voortstuwing en 'n sterk jazz-invloed.

Soms word van bestaande melodieë gebruik gemaak, onder meer Schubert se "Militêre Mars" in "My oupa was a soldier", die bekende Hallelujalied in "Die Heiland is gebore" en "Uit die blou van onse hemel" vir die poskantoor-toneel.

Laasgenoemde toneel gee die skurk van die verhaal, Brigadier de Wet, die kans

om sy wrewel oor die nuwê Suid-Afrika te lug. Die spottery met die bruin gemeenskap, waar die koor van die ComArt Choristers onder leiding van John Davids geskitter het, was 'n dramatiese en musikale hoogtepunt. 'n Voorbeeld van goeie rasseverhouding was dit egter nié.

Ofskoon die verhaal oor musiek gaan, is dit 'n wesenlike vraag of dit sterk genoeg vir 'n opera is. Veronica droom om haar landelike veraf-Karoo-bestaan vir 'n voller lewe en 'n sangloopbaan in Johannesburg te verruil, en sy sing vir toeriste (dit is 1995) om geld te verdien. Oupa, wat haar grootgemaak het en plaaswerk doen, is daarteen, maar moet uiteindelik teësnig toegee.

Vir my was die twee tonele wat eintlik min met die verhaal te doen het die sterkste: "Die Heiland is gebore" met Veronica se mooi diskant bo die lied (Melanie Scholtz is hier egter oorweldig deur die veel klankryker koor) asook die poskantoor-toneel.

Minder suksesvol was die gesproke dialoog met musiek daarby. Die musiek het die dialoog oorskadu en onduidelik gemaak.

Die sangers het sang van wisselende gehalte gelewer, met Scholtz as die skitterende ster. Ook Rajna se uitmuntende klavierspel kan nie ongemeld gelaat word nie.

Die wêreldpremière van *Valley Song* word vir Spier se volgende somer-kunste-fees beplan. Dit sal interessant wees om dié 13 uittreksels tot 'n volle opera te sien ontwikkel.

Die Burger

25 February 2003

Nuanses, patos en humor van Fugard behou in opera

Die vierde Suid-Afrikaanse dramaturg Athol Fugard se *Valley Song* het gelei tot 'n gelyknamige opera met 'n teks deur Guy Willoughby en musiek deur die Kaapse veteraan Thomas Rajna. Die eerste opvoering is vandag in die Spier-buitelugteater by Stellenbosch. Drie dae voor die groot dag het Rajna oor 'n koppie sterk koffie met Gottfried Maas gepraat.

DAT Thomas Rajna drie maande gelede 76 jaar oud geword het, is moeilik te glo wanneer 'n mens hom sien op en na hom luister. Die afgelope drie jaar het hy só baie gewerk dat daar vir sy stokperdjies – skaak en swem – geen tyd oor was nie. “Drie jaar lank het ek *Valley Song* gelewe en ingeasem,” sê hy.

Die bekende plaaslike joernalis, dramaturg en akteur Guy Willoughby het die bal aan die rol gesit nadat hy deur Athol Fugard se toneelstuk bekoor is. Willoughby het ook geesdriftig geskryf oor Rajna se ander opera, *Amarantha*, wat in November 2000 in die Kunstekaapwater sy wêreldpremière gehad het. Rajna is die regte komponis vir *Valley Song*, het Willoughby gereken.

Fugard was dadelik in sy skik met die plan, vertel Rajna. Later, nadat die dramaturg 'n video van dié opera in konsertvorm gesien het, het hy dit “'n wonderlike ervaring” genoem en bygevoeg: “Ek is opreg en diep dankbaar teenoor julle twee vir die nuwe lewe wat julle my toelastelike gegee het. Die musiek was 'n plesier... en die libretto is 'n wonderlike kondensering van die oorspronklike teks sonder verlies van enige van sy nuanses, humor en patos. Ten slotte – al die heerlike stemme! Julle het my trots gemaak op my land en sy mense, en ek kan nie anders as om te glo dat dit die gehoor se reaksie op jul volledige verhoogweergawe sal wees nie.”

Fugard woon deesdae in Amerika en wou vir die operapremière kom, maar sy dogter se gesondheid het die reis verdel.

Dit was moeilik om geld vir die opera te kry – selfs al is dit 'n betreklik eenvoudige produksie – en Rajna het vyf maande “van deur tot deur” gegaan. Hy is gewoon daar aan om sy eie publisiteitswerk te doen en het daarvoor laat in sy lewe e-pos-geletterd geraak. Danksy die Spier-kunstetrust, die Nasionale Kunsteraad, die Kuns-en-kultuurtrust (Act), Business and Arts South Africa (Basa), Nedbank en die Nasionale Lotery is nog 'n Suid-Afrikaanse opera gebore.

Twee jaar gelede kon Spier-gehore dele van *Valley Song* hoor. Nou is die partituur klaar en het die komponis dit voor die klavier met die sangers ingestudeer. Hy was ten nouste betrokke by die keuse van kunstenaars, van wie twee – Brad Liebl en Derick Ellis – ook in *Amarantha* was. Hy klink opgewonde oor die aand se repetisie met die Kaapse Filharmoniese Orkes en die dirigent Graham Scott. Self wou hy nie dirigeer nie, want hy meen dit kan ander beter doen.

“Rajna” is die Hongaarse vorm van die naam van die Europese rivier die Ryn. Dié musikus, oor wie se lewe veel geskryf kan word, kom egter van 'n ander groot rivier, die Donau. Boedapest, Hongarve se hoofstad, is die



Angela Kerrison en Ronald Theys in die opera *Valley Song* op Spier.

plek van sy kinderjare. Sy pa was 'n geneesheer wat as Jood deur Nazi's vermoor is in 1945, in die laaste weke van die Tweede Wêreldoorlog. In Hongarye was Nazi's wat hul Duitse makkers se patroon gevolg het. Talle het ongestraf gebly.

Thomas se ouer broer – later ook 'n dokter en twee jaar gelede oorlede – het in 'n arbeidskamp beland, maar kon ontsnap. Hul siek ma het beswyk kort nadat die Sowjet-diktator Josef Stalin se Rooi Leër Boedapest verower het.

Thomas het in 1947 Hongarye en sy broer agtergelaat en hom in Londen gevestig. Hy wou weggom van sy pa se moordenaars en van 'n land wat spoedig agter die Yster-gordyn sou wees. Eers nadat dié “gordyn” in 1989 verdwyn het, het hy teruggekeer. Dit was “'n ongemaklike, verontrustende gevoel”, en hy wil nie weer daar woon nie.

As agtjarige het hy met klavierlesse begin, en op 14% was sy eerste komposisie klaar: die “Eksotiese Prelude”, wat hy heimlik in die Duitsklas geskep het. Hy het dit nie laat publiseer nie, maar dit is nog in sy besit. Sy groot landgenoot Béla Bartók asook die uitgeweke Rus Igor Stravinsky het hom destyds beïnvloed.

Met 'n ander reus onder die Hongaarse komponiste, Zoltan Kodály (1881–1967), het Rajna later saamgewerk en bevriend geraak.

In 1946 is die eerste keer 'n Rajna-stuk gepubliseer, deur 'n Franse uitgewer. Dit heet *Dialog vir Klarinet en Klavier*.

Rajna het in Boedapest aan die Franz Liszt-akademie

gestudeer. In die Nazi-era moes hy daarvoor sy heid verberg.

In Londen het hy sy studie voortgesit en was hy wig as pianis, komponis en dosent aan die Gu School. In 1948 het hy met 'n medestudent getrou hulle is 17 jaar later geskei. In 1968 het 'n huwelik met die sopraan Ann Campion, 'n student van hoër selfde jaar is hul seun David gebore en 'n jaar later niel, die Kaapse balletster. (David was gestrem en 1996 verdrink.)

Die lewe in die Britse hoofstad was “spanning”. Danksy sy Amerikaanse medestudent Lamar Cr (1926 – 1998) het Rajna einde 1970 na Kaapstad ver Crowson was 'n internasionale pianis wat hom Kaap gevestig en hier gedoseer het. Deur sý toedo Rajna suksesvol aansoek gedoen om 'n klavierpos e Suid-Afrikaanse Musiekkollege, die Universiteit Kaapstad se musiekafdeling, waar hy in 1993 as me fessor afgetree het.

Rajna sê hy gee sy komposisies nie opusnon maar hy skat hy het sowat 30 groot werke geskryf e kleineres. Hy beklemtoon by herhaling dat sy : “kommunikatiewe moderne lirisme” is, en haal die tuur van *Valley Song* uit om dit te probeer staaf. l nie so moeilik toeganklik wees soos die Duitse heinz Stockhausen (nes Rajna in 1928 gebore) niel.

Net voordat hy moet groet, beskryf hy oegewon stel van *Valley Song*: 'n roteerbare “volmaakte r van 'n klein Karoo-woning”. Dit klink belowend.

Opera 'Valley Song' móét gesien word

GOTTFRIED MAAS

OPERA: *Valley Song*, met musiek deur Thomas Rajna en 'n libretto deur Guy Willoughby, gegrond op Athol Fugard se gelyknamige toneelstuk. Opgevoer deur Kaapstad Opera (KO) en die Kaapse Filharmoniese Orkes (KFO). Dirigent: Graham Scott. Regie: Steven Stead. In die Spier-buitelugteater by Stellenbosch. Nog op 8, 10 en 12 Maart om 20:00.

ANDERS as by die opening van Spier, KO en die KFO se *Il Trovatore* nege aande tevore, toe die opvoering halfpad gestaak moes word, het die reën eergister gewag totdat 'n geskiedkundige wêreldpremière klaar was. Die wind het wel soms in die sangers se mikrofoontjies geblaas, 'n hoed afgewaaie en iets van die dekor laat val, maar dit kon die vreugde net gering demp. Ironies is in die stuk, wat kort ná die 1994-verkiesing afgespeel, sprake van die wind – letterlik en in die politieke sin.

Uit Athol Fugard se "mees liriese" toneelstuk, nou tien jaar oud en waarin die lief en leed van 'n bruin Karoo-gemeenskap uitgebeeld word, het Guy Willoughby, Thomas Rajna, Steven Stead, Greg King (ontwerp) en Paul Adams (beligting) 'n operajuweel geskep. Gelukkig was die teater byna vol, en tereg het heelparty mense



Ronald Theys en Angela Kerrison in die nuwe opera *Valley Song*.

staande hande geklap.

Die realistiese stel en kostuums, is eenvoudig maar treffend. Deur die "gebou" te draai verander dit in verskillende huise of 'n kerk, sodat die 11 tonele flink op mekaar volg en die opvoering met 'n pouse net sowat 2½ uur duur.

Die musiek is 'n kombinasie van Rajna se toeganklike "kommunikatiewe moderne lirisme", Karooritmes en ou kerkgesange.

Nie een van die sangsoliste het sleg gevaar nie. Die belangrikste karakters is die 17-jarige Veronica Jonkers, wat in Johannesburg wil gaan sing, en haar konserwatiewe oupa Buks. 'n Mens kan jou skaars

beter vertolkers as Angela Kerrison en Ronald Theys voorstel. Al is Kerrison 'n Engelssprekende gekleurde van Botswana, het sy – ook danksy haar goeie uitspraak van die Afrikaanse frases – soos 'n egte Karoo-kind gelyk. In die snaakse én in die hartseer-tonele het sy met oorgawe gespeel en haar gebruiklike lieflike sang gelewer. Ook Theys het aangrypend gespeel en knap gesing. Dit was goed om dié ou Kaapse staatsmaker weer op die verhoog te hê.

Die ouerige, ontnugterde Witman, wat belangstel in die grond waarop Buks-hulle lewe, is deur die betreklik jong tenoor Derick

Ellis vertolk. Hy het geloofwaardig genoeg gelyk, en sy stem het lank laas só beïndruk.

Twee bruin karakters is aan wit mezzosoprane gegee. Die veteraan Christina Farr ('n gebore Brit) en die Duitse nuweling Sophie Harmsen was kostelik en vokaal vleidend as onderskeidelik mev. Oliphant (die skinderende posmeesteres) en die skinderende skoonmaker Stella. Soos Harmsen is Nokrismesi Skota 'n lid van KO se Ateljee. Skota het verruklik gelyk en geklink as 'n deelnemer aan 'n *Pop Idols*-agtige TV-kompetisie.

Die ervare Kaapse Amerikaner Brad Liebl het sy goed behoue stem laat hoor as die "verkrampete" brig. De Wet, en Cecil (nie "Cecile" soos op die program nie) Peters het tevrede gestel as die polisieersant.

Die leiding van Graham Scott en sensitiewe, genuanseerde spel deur die KFO was belangrike bestanddele in die suksesresep. So ook die lewendige sang en spel deur die ComArt-koor van Elsiesrivier, versterk deur ad hoc-sangers en afgerig deur John Davids.

Mag geen musiek- en toneelvriend van die Skiereiland, Stellenbosch en die Somerset-Wes-Strand-gebied dié kans laat verbygaan nie. Die nuwe *Valley Song* verdien vol auditoriums en 'n vaste plek in die repertoire van alle Suid-Afrikaanse teaters. Mag dit ook in die buiteland inslag vind.

Die Burger

10 Maart 2005

"Valley Song" verdien aandag
Big Dada- The rise and fall of Idi Amin
Beeld Plus 10 March 2005, 11 Mar 05

Die tekortkomings van 'n teater staan nio los van die sukses al dan nie van 'n produksie nie. Of staan dit los daarvan?

Spier-afiteater, Stellenbosch Thys Odendaal

Die tekortkomings van 'n teater staan nio los van die sukses al dan nie van 'n produksie nie. Of staan dit los daarvan?

Hoe pragtige besoekersvriendelik die pastorale Spier-landgoed ook al is, die verhoog van die afiteater. hoe-wel mettertyd verbeter, is ongemaklik en ontoereikend vir veral die kom-pleksiteite van 'n opera - in verhouding verreweg te breed vir sy diepte, met eintlik net twee nou ingange aan weerskante. 'n Onhebbelike ruimte vir ontwerpers en regisseurs, soos ons al met selfs ("die geniale") Mar-thinus Basson enaar het.

Daar is nio baie wat jy kan doen om 'n repertorium-opera - neem // trova-tore wat nou saam met Rajna se Valley song afwisselend op die plank is -daar op te voer nie. (Jy hoop dat Verdi en die sangers die knoop sal deur-hak.)

Wanneer 'n opera soos Valley song van die grond af geskep word, geld an-der faktore ook. Greg King het die dekorontwerp in die ruimte aangepas met wat nodig is om die verhaal te huisves - 'n ronde "gebou"-verhoog links op 'n draaiverhoog wat die wis-selende inkleding van die 11 tonele ten grondslag le.

Kortliks gaan die storie oor oupa Buks Jonkers (Ronald Theys) wat be-kommerd is dat hy sy huurgrond gaan verloor, met die onsekerheid wat die nuwe demokrasie van 1994 in die Oos-Kaap meegebring het.

Sy kleindogter is Veronica (Angela Kerrison). Die 17-jarige mooi en ge-sonde meisiekind sien 'n popster op TV en hunker na Johannesburg, om self 'n sanger te word. Die opvallend onderliggende "drama" le in die gaping tussen oud en jonk, die moe'r ge-slag teenoor die onverskrokke jeug-drome, versterk deur die groot veran-derings, fisiek en inherent, wat die nuwe politieke bestel in die mense van die streek meebring.

Thomas Rajna is 'n gesoute kompo-nis wat in sy instrumentale werk oor dekades nie van die dramatiese weg-geskrum het nie. As hy 'n Athol Fugard-drama in 'n opera omskep,

Ronald Theys is moedig as oupa Buks Jonkers en Angela Kerrison uitbundig en vasberade as sy kleindogter Veronica in Rajna se Valley song.

verdien dit toegewyde aandag.

Die skrywer, akteur en kritikus Guy Willoughby het die opera van 'n libretto voorsien. Die Oos-Kaapse dia-loog van die bruin mense van Nieu-Bethesda, wat Fugard so idiomaties in sy toneeltekste neerpen, is in 'n groot mate sinryk behou. Die twee ka-rakters is uitgebrei met nog sewe so-liste, met die sterkste inspraak deur The Whiteman en die komiese ontla-ding van Mrs Oliphant (gewigig ag-terdieposkantoor-toonbank) in 'n he-wige woordewisseling met brig. De Wet.

Die eerste aanskouer, maar veral aanhoor, bring 'n klompie beden-kings mee wat nie voor die hand lig-gend verklarings bied nie.

In welke mate is dit meer opera as musiekspel? 'n Musiekspel van die meer onlangse, gevorderde soort mis-kien, soos die behendige skeppings

van 'n Sondheim of Yeston.

Twee redes: Daar is veels te veel dialoog (waarvan heel wat in of Sprechgesang of die betroubare resi-tatief omgesit kon word). Dit is die op-gestapelde dialoog wat waarskynlik die besluit tot klankversterking in die hand gewerk het. ("Opera-klanking-nieurs" is 'n eg Kaapse ding.) Maar waarom dan opero-sangers? (Piazzol-la se Maria de Buenos Aires 'n jaar ge-lode uit daardie geweste was propvol klankversterkte akteurs.)

Sou 'n mens binnenshuis 'n beter oordeel oor die musikale en veral komposisionele aspek kon fel? In die Spier-buitelug klink Rajna se musiek ondervoed, en tog is 'n mens skuins-weg bewus van 'n doeltreffende orkes-trasie wat die teks en die tonele ver-helder - soms meer verkuil, soos in die konfrontasie tussen Veronica en haar oupa Buks wat haar as huishulp sien pleks van 'n TV-sanger (Tonele :1 & 8); en andersins rojal met luister-ryke melodie en harmonie gesmeor soos oorbekende kerkliedere in die (skaars) groepverband (Tonele 3 & 9).

'n Motiefwat.se, jeugdige drome en voortvarende toekomsvisie van 'n jong meisie suggereer teenoor die slug vermanings van die oner geslag, word bemerk, maar spreek nie sterk genoeg uit die orkesbak nie. Daar is orkestrale kleur (in die instrument-keuses) en nuanses met emosionele implikasies, maar dit gaan hier jam-merlik verlore.

Miskien is dit die akoestiek wat die sku musikale inspraak aan kontraste ontnem - die intensiteit in 'n konfrontasie wat in 'n katarsis tussen oupa en dootter broei, soms afgees een-saamheid wat die ouderdom bring teenoor die aansteeklike optimisme van 'n jong, vreeslose hart by

jam-merlik vorkende musikale lorraine sonder onigo impak.

Kerrison skep'n baldadige 17-jarige noisie wat die wereld wil onkeer. Sy spool met 'n natuurlikeaanslag, maar soms not-net tenaiefv'n meisie aan die einde van haar tienertyd. Sy is 'n sterk teenwoordigheid en verleen 'n dankbare musikale momentum aan die sink, ondanks die vlae dialoog. Haar ernstige "gosprekko" (en angs) is enigins meer gefokus as haar te flambojante pogings tot jonkwees, wat soms 'n uit wans vreemd-komioso teenpool skep.

Theys speel on Buks mot 'n hals-starrige kinkel, 'n groot liefste vir sy groenteland on teerheid vir sy gelief kleinkind. Die stem is pragtig go-nuanser om die toks, maar sangge-wys onthullend wankolrig Ofhy die rol sou kon doursion sonder 'n mikro-foon, is to betwyfel. Nietemin, sy soort oortuigende verhoogvervang is does-dae bitter skaars.

Derick Ellis is The Whiteman, 'n darem te goedige gentleman wat nio 'n bepaalde rigtingaan sy rolfunksie goo nio.

Brad Liebl, daarontoon, se laat sto-ouso Moore-brigadier is 'n eon-dimonsionele karikatuur, 'n militaris uit 'n Schuster-moowie. Sy sion net spoo spat, arms swaai en viturspu-wende woede in wydgosperdo oe.

Tina Farr so poskantoor-juffrou is komies meer sinryk as Liobl so mal man. maar die rol het nie Veel moor o'i7i die boon as 'n klug-brokkio nio. Stephen Stoad se regie onthul nie veel meer as good oppesotto "pront-fies" nie, hand aan hand met on-go'inspiroordo beligting wai in onkolo sokwense oomblik die stemming bepaalen vorryk.

Dit is in die kerktablo's dat Paul Adams se beligtingplan sterk drama tiese bydraes lower en oombliklik na die inner-govool van die karaktors

peil.

'n Nuwe opera is 'n onormo onder-neming. Al is Valley sonx so skaal heelwat kloiner, sou 'n groter waag-hatsigheid met die innemende Fugard-stuk nio onvanpas woes nio. 'n Mens kry die gevoel dat jy hier to make het met 'n musiekspel wat daar na smag om as goeio opera gekloon te word.

• Vandag en Saterdag 20:00.

APPENDIX C

Enoch, Prophet of God

- A condensed, historic account of the Bulhoek massacre and the prophet who led the Israelites, Enoch Mgiijima. In: CAPAB. 1995. *Enoch, Prophet of God*. Michael Williams. (programme notes)
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- Visser C. 1998. This is our land. *Mail & Guardian*: 5, July 17 – 23.

A condensed, historic account of the Bulhoek Massacre and the prophet who led the Israelites, Enoch Mgijima.

1869 : Enoch is born at Bulhoek and raised as a Wesleyan Methodist – he later becomes a lay preacher at age twenty-eight.

1907 : Enoch has a vision in the desert – a black angel tells him to worship God in the traditional way.

1919 : He prophesies that his followers will join him at Ntabelanga. Three thousand gather to await the Lord's coming.

1920 : January : Enoch applies to Geoffrey Nightingale, the inspector of African locations, for permission to hold the Passover celebrations at Ntabelanga. Nightingale is not keen, but Enoch promises that they will return to their homes.

September : 1300 Israelites camp at Ntabelanga illegally; they are pressured to leave but refuse since Ntabelanga has become holy ground.

12 December : Negotiations prove fruitless and the hundred-strong police-force believe that the 1000 Israelites will attack. The police withdraw, leaving supplies and tents behind. Rumour has it that their bullets turn to water.

17 December : The government approaches 'moderate' Africans to persuade the Israelites to leave; they in turn, ask to negotiate with the Prime Minister. He is not part of the government delegation at their first meeting, and it proves fruitless.

1921 : In early April the government resumes talks. The Israelites reject the proposals of the Native Affairs Commission. The Israelites, now 3000 in number, pitch a tabernacle tent in the centre of town in order to worship four times a day. A Bible School is established and the women organize a nursing brigade. The church elders govern the village, but refuse to pay taxes. It is clear why they cannot be allowed to succeed.

In early May, the commission fails to reach a peaceful outcome and Colonel Truter orders eight hundred policemen to the location. On 21 May he issues a final ultimatum for the Israelites to leave or have their leader arrested and their houses demolished.

May 24 : It is Empire Day and Jan Smuts' birthday; the police claim to have fired in self-defence and the Israelites claim that the police fired first. Three hundred and eighty Israelites are killed, one policeman suffers a shoulder wound and one hundred and fifty men are imprisoned. Everything is destroyed and the captives are forced to dig a mass grave. Enoch and his brother, Charles, are arrested and sentenced to six years' hard-labour. Charles dies in prison and Enoch, after having been released in 1924, dies on 5 March 1928.

DIRECTOR/LIBRETTIST

Opera is such a magical art form! It combines the mysteries of human expression such as story-telling, music-making, voice production and art design in a way that continues to fascinate people all over the world. The coalescence of these elements and how to concoct an opera's ineffable chemistry was the motivation to write this libretto. My desire to create a South African opera began with a musical I wrote in Kathmandu, Nepal, which was called *Siddhartha, Birth of a Dream*. The musical and its subsequent performances became a celebration of a culture and a sacred story in which many people of the ancient Hindu kingdom participated. How could I not be aware of the irony of creating a work in Kathmandu, which was thousands of miles from my own home? I returned to this country with the idea that one day I would create a similar work. *Enoch, Prophet of God* is the result.

The history of the Bulhoek massacre was told to me by Willem van der Walt, which he found in Robert Edgar's *Because they chose the plan of God*. Edgar's concise account of the Bulhoek massacre was my initial inspiration for the opera. The vision that Enoch Mgijima had for the black nation was an apocalyptic one, filled with blood prophecies and miracles, unlike his namesake in the Old Testament. This powerful history of a man struggling against the dictates of a government and those of his own conscience seemed to me filled with music. I heard the sermons of Enoch as an aria, heard the responses of the Israelites as an operatic chorus, heard the battle scene played by full orchestra and heard, too, the Passover ceremony celebrated by traditional and religious Xhosa songs.



Halfway through writing the libretto I came across a recent publication of David Philip called *This Day and Age*, a novel written by Mike Nicol. The magic realism of the narrative which spun a story about a fictitious Enoch and a host of other characters was inspirational. The coincidence of this publication and my writing a libretto on the same historical event was an opportunity not to be missed. I owe the idea of a Bible chained to Enoch's wrist, the sentiments expressed in Enoch's opening aria and some of the imagery in Zandile's two arias to Mike Nicol's imagination.

Other literary sources have come from Israelite hymns sung by the church, Francis Carey Slater's poem, *Drought* and a fragment from a Langston Hughes poem.

I have found too, that creating an opera is the art of collaboration. Nothing is possible without the composer. In Roelof Temmingh I have found the perfect collaborator. He changed not a word of the text and phoned me once to ask my permission to add four words. These were "Ha, Ha - Ha, Ha" in Act Two. Roelof's musical realisation of the text has surpassed any of the dreams I had for the opera. Lungile Jacobs's Xhosa improvisational music is a first for an opera, which normally has a very strict set of musical rules. Weaving traditional Xhosa music with Temmingh's score is another magical part of the chemistry that makes up this South African opera. The comedy of presenting a designer with half of a libretto and no music and then expecting a set design could only have been possible because of Nadya Cohen's talents and the faith she had in the project. The Foundation for the Creative Arts played the crucial role of patron in the creative phase of this opera. I owe a great debt of thanks to the Foundation for its support.

My expectations? That this opera will be a celebration of who we are in this country and what we hope to become.

MICHAEL WILLIAMS obtained a BA Drama and English degree and a Performer's Diploma at the University of Cape Town. After his studies he travelled from Israel to Kathmandu where he was appointed Director of Drama at the Lincoln International School in Nepal and directed a musical adaptation of Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

He worked as assistant producer for PACT Opera where he created programmes for the local communities and schools. One of these was *The Milkbird*, an opera for children in the townships. When he joined CAPAB Opera in 1990 he re-staged a new version of *The Milkbird*. He has assisted on numerous productions in Cape Town, including *Don Carlo*, *Hänsel und Gretel*, *Così fan Tutte*, *Don Giovanni*, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, *La Bohème* and *Madama Butterfly*. In February 1991 he directed Menotti's *The Consul* in the NICO Theatre, his third major production after the première of Hendrik Hofmeyr's *The Fall of the House of Usher* in the State Theatre for the Pretoria Technikon Opera School and Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* in Roodepoort in 1990. Williams wrote the music and text for *The Seven-Headed Snake* in 1991 which was performed at schools in the southern and northern Cape Province and in townships in the Cape Peninsula. This opera was also performed at the Standard Bank Festival of Arts in Grahamstown, together with *The Milkbird*.

In April 1991 Williams assisted the international director Sonja Frisell in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* at the NICO. In November 1991 he joined the University of Pittsburgh's Semester at Sea programme as Director of their Theatre Arts Department. This took him on a world tour from Tokyo, around Africa and South America and back to New York. In 1992 Williams wrote a new African Opera, *Child of the Moon*, which was performed in many towns and townships in the Cape Province and is now presented as a puppet opera on the Cape Town Opera Festival Fringe. In 1993 he wrote *The Orphans of Qumbu*, which was also performed in townships and suburbs in and around Cape Town. He also directed Mozart's *Don Giovanni* at the NICO Opera House in August 1993.



NEDBANK

Enoch, Prophet of God
Roelof Temmingh
CAPAB
Nico Theatre, Cape Town

The Cape Performing Arts Board, (CAPAB), has very courageously mounted the first opera festival to be staged in Africa, despite the nail-biting uncertainties which surround the funding of opera in the 'new' South Africa. The production which gathered the most interest and pre-opening night speculation was undoubtedly Roelof Temmingh's *Enoch, Prophet of God*, which received its world première.

If the purpose in commissioning this opera was to convey the fact that opera is something which any South African can relate to, provided the subject matter is South African in character, then, I believe that the exercise was a failure. *Enoch* is not an easy piece for the untrained ear. This is not an opera in which melody abounds. With the exception of only a few bars here and there, most notably the refrain which accompanies the words, 'I hear a sweet voice calling', there is little in the way of melodic content which remains in one's mind at the conclusion.

The source for Temmingh's opera is an event which occurred in the Eastern Cape in 1921 when a force of 800 policemen gathered at Bulhoek, about 25km from Queenstown. The government had instructed them to confront an African religious leader and proclaimed prophet, Enoch Mgijima and his religious group called the Israelites. The Israelites, believing that the end of the world was approaching, refused to leave their holy village of Ntabelanga.

Led by Enoch they developed a spirit of resistance against the state, believing in the power of God's word and the message it had for their people, and thus, a religious occurrence suddenly became an act of political defiance, culminating in a battle between the police force, armed with machine guns and cannons, and the Israelites, armed only with spears and sticks. Nearly 200 Israelites lost their lives, many more were injured and only one policeman sustained minor injuries - an uneven event which has been all too often repeated in the course of South Africa's troubled political history.

The true flashpoint in the opera comes when Enoch is accused of abducting a young girl, Zandile, against her will while, in reality, she has chosen to join the Israelites voluntar-

ily and to marry Moses, one of Enoch's followers.

It is this story set against a much bigger story of political events, prejudices and struggle between church and state, that lends poignancy to the overall work and which elevates it above being yet another purely political statement.

The work would benefit from some tightening up and judicious editing. The monologues in the opening act could well do with some pruning - they are just too long and Temmingh's style of declamatory singing with very little attention being given to a smooth vocal line is a shade tedious even for a trained musical ear accustomed to the rigours of contemporary operatic style.

Anyone expecting a brilliant fusion between African and Eurocentric musical styles was bound to be disappointed. Despite the insertion of some highly effective passages of Xhosa choral music, conceived by Lungile Jacobs, *Enoch* is essentially a work conceived within the ambit of Western musical traditions.

There is nothing startlingly original about the score, either, which is stylistically reminiscent of the earlier operas of Benjamin Britten, both in terms of orchestration and the *Sprechgesang* style of vocal delivery. This influence is particularly marked in the scene in which the white populace of Queenstown vents its anger against Enoch and his Israelite movement in a manner and style which is very similar to an identical dramatic scene in Britten's *Peter Grimes* - the chorus calling Enoch's name repeatedly in the same manner as the fishing village folk repeatedly call for Grimes to make an appearance to answer charges against him. In content, *Enoch* has obvious parallels with Britten's opera in that both Enoch and Grimes are accused of a crime against an individual by a self-righteous crowd, swayed by their own biased outlook and anxious to take the law into their own hands if necessary.

Michael Williams' libretto is dramatically effective even though he occasionally resorts to banal phraseology, particularly in his depiction of the white settlers who come across as a group even more vapid than those depicted in the film *White Mischief*, which they, as Eastern Cape pioneering stock, most certainly were not! It is exercises in dramatic licence such as this that leaves one wondering just how accurate a depiction is being applied to the other side. Dramatically the work is effective enough,

although it would have benefited overall had the principal characters been drawn with a greater degree of subtlety. Conflict between the two sides is portrayed on a very one-dimensional level, and here, too, the work would have benefited through more light and shade being shed on the age-old South African problem of racial conflict.

Enoch achieved its maximum impact as a result of Williams' staging using a minimalistic set designed by Nadya Cohen and atmospheric lighting by John T Baker.

The Cape Town Symphony Orchestra - making, I believe, its début as a pit orchestra at the Nico Theatre - contributed some stunningly evocative playing under the baton of David John Scarf. The greatest impact, however, was achieved by the cast headed by Abel Motsoadi, a member of CAPAB's Opera Studio, in the title rôle and a crop of young black South African singers who proved to be more than adequate in their rôles and who all inspire hope that opera will, indeed, have a glorious future in the new South Africa - provided, of course, that the development of opera is placed firmly in the hands of experts and not the collection of charlatans and politicians who are currently jockeying for positions as our new cultural commissars.

I see no reason whatsoever for this country not being able, within a decade at the outside, to give the world several dozen professional black opera singers. On each hearing Motsoadi continues to impress one more and more with his remarkably rich, full bass-baritone voice, his stately appearance and his ongoing dramatic ability, both in terms of vocal inflection and stage presence. He conferred on the title rôle a serene dignity befitting a true prophet. I also found myself falling more and more under the spell of Sibongile Mngoma, who sang the rôle of Zandile. This young soprano clearly has a most impressive career ahead of her. Her remarkable good looks, good diction and near faultless vocal control, particularly in the upper register, where she can float a perfectly phrased *pianissimo* with seemingly remarkable ease proved to be one of the highlights of the entire production. Marcus Desando who sang the rôle of Moses and Fikile Mvinjelwa, who sang the rôle of Charles both acquitted themselves with distinction. Both are fine, young emerging talents whose future careers will be worth close attention.

The 'Eurocentric' cast was particularly strong with well delineated performances from John Eagar as John Nightingale, the district officer of Queenstown, Christina Farr, as his wife and Gordon Christie as Tom Jenkins, the head of the local militia. Ronald Theys as Jacob Jabavu, Zandile's father also turned in a well rounded performance.

The CAPAB chorus, augmented with some really promising young voices from CAPAB's Opera Choral Training programme sang with distinction, producing a richness and diversity of tone as a result of a marriage of cultures one seldom encounters in an opera house. Ever with its inherent faults in terms of structure and taking into account the excessive use of seemingly endless recitative as opposed to memorable arias and ensembles, *Enoch, Prophet of God* is a significant new work and one which, I am sure, will mark the birth of a new era for opera in South Africa. JULIUS EICHBAUM



Natalie Dessay and Marcus Jérôme sing in Lakmé at the Opéra Comique

Lucia di Lammermoor
Donizetti
Opéra de Paris Bastille
Lakmé Delibes
Opéra-Comique Paris

Three of the four opera venues in Paris have sensibly decided to concentrate each on a particular age or area of opera; the fourth, newest and largest, the Opéra Bastille, seems to be cornering the market for revolutionary productions - appropriately enough perhaps. If the aim is to *épater la bourgeoisie* then director Andrei Serban certainly succeeded in this *Lucia*, premièred in late January.

ENOCH, PROPHET OF GOD. By Roelof Temmingh. Libretto and Direction: Michael Williams; CTSO conducted by David John Scarr; Xhosa choral music Lungile Jacobs; CAPAB Chorusmaster Vetta Wise. Movement: Marlene Biom. Presented by Capab Opera in association with Nedbank, Nice Theatre.

ROELOF Temmingh's *Enoch, Prophet of God*, premiered last night, is powerful enough to become known far and wide.

Enoch is pertinent to our times but is an opera for all times. Not only is it an enactment of an incident that took place in the Eastern Cape in 1921, it also preaches a powerful anti-war message and dwells on the importance of the cautionary words of women pleading for peace.

Briefly this is the story of the founding of the Israelite Church, whose followers built a town around their tabernacle at Ntabelanga near Queenstown.

They soon became a potent symbol as an alternative to white rule and for that reason the government could not allow them to succeed. They were finally routed in the Bulhoek Massacre where 380 Israelites were killed and one policeman suffered a shoulder wound.

Abel Motsoadi, who played Enoch, with his Bible handcuffed to his wrist, brought tremendous dignity and stature to the part, compensating for whatever was lacking in his voice production on opening night.

Enoch's counterpart, the native commissioner John Nightingale, was played by John Eager, whose wide experience in opera was apparent.

Little light relief in powerful and dramatic story

Nightingale finds himself against his better judgement, having to obey Smuts' orders to take action against the Israelites. He is also pestered by the head of the local militia, Tom Jenkins, convincingly played by Gordon Christie, who is anxious for a show of force.

Marcus Desmond, as Moses, is Jenkins' counterpart on the Israelites' side. He urges Enoch to rise against the whites and take courage from the initial battle where the soldiers' bullets seemed to turn to water. Desmond's voice projected well and his diction was excellent.

Mrs Nightingale played by Christina Farr and Zandile, Moses's wife, played by Sibongile Mngoma both served as the cautionary female voices, pleading, against war.

Mrs Nightingale's garden party in Queenstown provided a welcome moment of light relief in an otherwise heavily dramatic and highly charged story. The difficult chorus singing was accomplished ex-

pertly and here one met Zandile's father Jacob Jabavu, a cameo role expertly handled by Ronald Theys.

There are six silent spirits present throughout the production: earthy, strange, dream people who, through inspired choreography, make a strong impact. Designer Nadya Cohen's spiralling set on the revolving stage was ingenious and John Baker's creative lighting always appropriate. Maria Consiglio is responsible for the effective costumes.

I had expected more African influence in the music but this was evident only in the inspirational Xhosa hymns which are woven into the score — the responsibility of chorusmaster Lungile Jacobs.

The battle scene music was violent, its terror augmented by the presence of percussionist Linda Muller on stage. The CTSO under conductor David John Scarr handled the difficult score with thorough professionalism.



MOSES IN VOICE: Marcus Desdando takes the role of Moses in the premiere of Roelof Temmingh's opera "Enoch, Prophet of God".

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Madama Napier in the bush

CAPE TIMES
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 11, 1997

FIONA CHISHOLM

Six a big game hunter who seduces his client's wife, coaching murder, all played out in the African bush. Mike de Villiers' new 40-part serial on TV, *Wrong! It's South Africa's first "safari opera", Sacred Bones*, with well-known Madama Napier in the lead in the first opera where she doesn't have to wear a train, a crown, or come down a flight of steps, or die.

The play, Pessler, a feisty but alcoholic frontier woman, who is determined to stay on her fidelity farm even when it is threatened. All the humorous moments in the opera are given to her.

Sacred Bones, which marks the second collaboration between composer Roelof Temmingh and librettist Michael Williams since *Enoch, Prophet of God*, will have its world premiere in the Nico Theatre on Saturday night. There will be five performances there with two to follow at both Windhoek and Grahamstown.

But why when opera is struggling to survive, should Cape Town Opera take a risk with an unknown chamber opera?

Michael Williams has his answer. "If we are going to keep doing museum pieces we will not make a contribution to the international opera repertoire. We now have the freedom to tell the stories we have to tell, so we should be able to make an impact on the musical scene. Opera came from Europe and we

should send something new and different back to Europe.

"How will history judge us in 20 or 30 years time if we are still only doing *Madama Butterfly* and not exploring our own sound and our own stories?"

But mindful of the resistance to new work, Williams has gone all out to make a meaty "sexy as all hell" plot lasting just 85 minutes without an interval.

"After *Enoch* I felt that Roelof had another opera in him and when I latched on to the idea of a bush opera, I discovered his second passion was the wilderness. So we had this idea to take an expedition of five people on a safari and allow all the tensions, romance and intrigue to brew in the bush.

"The music — written for 15 orchestral instruments with a heavy dose of percussion — is more tonal, more melodious than *Enoch* and for the first time Temmingh has flirted with African rhythms and African ideas to make it all very atmospheric.

"There are some lovely moments, too, where I have dialogue and he has underscored it with sounds of the African night — the way it is done with owls and insects in movies."

The *ad hoc* orchestra of CPO players will be conducted by David Tibboald. Fred Abrahamse, tackling his first opera, will direct the production in which Peter Cazalet is responsible for the sets, Malcolm Hurrell for the lighting and David Krugel the choreography. The story follows the experiences of the hunter Robin Hurt (played by an

OPERA NEWS

on-form John Eager) who, with his tracker Naru (Fikile Mvinjelwa), leads the Plomer expedition into Africa to find fossils and to investigate their relevance to man.

Plomer, a dry academic palaeontologist (Gordon Christie) and his wife Kathleen (Isabelle van Zyl) are confronted by their disintegrating relationship as they travel further into the bush, making her ripe for an affair with the hunter Robin.

"The seduction happens while Robin is showing her how to shoot and she becomes aware of his maleness and smell as he is holding the rifle against his chest close to her.

"Her husband cracks under the strain of her infidelity and understands that violence is in our genes and part of our primitive ancestry. But I won't even tell you who is murdered because that will spoil the ending."

A sub-plot — involving the tensions of Robin's side-kick, Naru and a chorus of six men, by turn bearers, poachers and guerrilla fighters — adds further interest in a plot which has a hunt, a storm, a seduction scene, a banquet and a murder.

It's not surprising that David Tibboald has commented that *Sacred Bones* promises to be a "busy night at the opera".



Congratulations are in order here

SACRED BONES

Music by Roelof Temmingh, Libretto by Michael Williams

REVIEWED BY: Carl Fourie

DIRECTOR: Fred Abrahamse

CONDUCTOR: Chamber Orchestra conducted by David Tidboald

SOLOISTS: John Eager, Fikile Mvinjelwa, Isobelle van Zyl, Gordon Christie, Marita Napier.

WHERE: Nico Malan

rectly played, only the composer and orchestra will really know.

The opening chorus was rhythmically dubious.

Peter Cazalet's set, and Malcolm Hurrell's lighting designs, yet again combine to good effect.

The set is essentially simple, almost drab, and is offset with evocative lighting effects.

Michael Williams's libretto calls for numerous African dance rituals.

However, these do not convince of integrity or of authority.

Performing a tribal dance with a Western hat had no ring of authenticity to it.

Because of the work's chamber construction, the fleeting reference to, and stage presence of, the poachers, did not contribute much to the drama of the looming danger encircling the party, either.

The opera climaxes with a murder.

The choice of victim is strange, resulting in an almost unnatural truncation of events.

Temmingh's score, too tends to dissipate in the closing bars of the work, rather than flesh out the truth of the drama.

Dramatically, all five soloists are to be congratulated on performances that emphasise the humanity and emotions of the characters.

Director Fred Abrahamse's drama background certainly had a great deal to do with this.

John Eager's imposing physical presence was beautifully matched by



Sacred Bones: Marita Napier as Bessie and John Eager as Robin, expedition leader

his rich baritone voice.

His character convinced of his love for the veld and untamed wilds of Africa.

His aria recalling the elephant hunt was shockingly effective for its reality and close-to-the-bone relevance.

Fikile Mvinjelwa as the tracker, and Gordon Christie as the academic presented good character contrasts. Vocally both were pleasing, with well-rounded voices and clear diction.

Marita Napier's *Bessie* is a truly rich character. She has a wickedly

wry sense of humour, yet deals with great personal trials; she is strong yet vulnerable to alcohol abuse; she is realistic, yet a romantic at heart. Napier's portrayal is laudable.

Isobelle van Zyl needs to pronounce her words more clearly. What is the point of an English libretto, if no-one can interpret the words without the help of subtitles?

Cape Town Opera, Michael Williams, Roelof Temmingh and the Arts and Culture Trust of the President are to be congratulated on the courage in writing and mounting this production.

SACRED BONES: Music by Roelof Temmingh and libretto by Michael Williams. With John Eagar, Isabelle van Zyl, Fikile Mvinjelwa, Marita Napier and Gordon Christie. Chorus and chamber orchestra conducted by David Tidboald. Directed for Cape Town Opera by Fred Abrahamse. Designs by Peter Cazalet, lighting Malcolm Hurrell, choreography David Krügel. At the Nico Theatre until June 28.

SACRED BONES is described as a "South African Chamber Opera" which is, in its way, an accurate enough description of the scale of musical and singing forces involved in this new collaboration between librettist Williams and composer Temmingh.

However, in one respect, the work is perhaps rather uncomfortably squeezed into chamber proportions, for the libretto has sufficient potential for a much more detailed and analytical examination of the several themes and subplots with which it is generously endowed.

The tale is of a palaeontological expedition into the "Border country" funded by a university, commissioned by Professor Plomer (Christie) accompanied by his wife (Van Zyl), led by a professional hunter (Eagar), assisted by his right-hand man, Naru (Mvinjelwa) and staffed by six bearers (who also double as poachers and mercenaries).

The expedition is en route to the Nieuwoudt farm, now in the hands of Bessie Lutter (Napier) who, unbeknown to the expedition, has recently suffered both the loss of her husband and a rape in an attack on the farm by a band of mercenaries.

This is the matrix within which the tensions are played out between, on the one hand, the participants in the expedition themselves and, on the other, those between the white intruders and the African bush and its endemic inhabitants.

These include sexual tensions (the attraction between the hunter, Hurt, and the professor's wife, and between Lutter and Naru), social tensions (between the professor and Hurt, and the widow and Naru) and cultural tensions (between the whites, the ambivalent Naru, the bush-wise Lutter and the endemic population).

This is an awful lot of material to compress into less than 90 minutes and inevitably there is a good deal of confusion, which is exacerbated by the use of the same six chorus members as bearers, poachers and mercenaries. Without reading the actual libretto, many of the activities must be nigh unintelligible to the average viewer. Even with such benefit, one has to interpret actions against a mental check-list of plot to understand the import of the direction.

To this extent, therefore, Abrahamse has not succeeded in the mimic quality of his stage direction and clarity of action. In many cases, dialogue disappears when not coupled to explicit dialogue.

The compressed nature of the action also results in some conundrums that are not easy to resolve. We are left wondering, how, when, in what circumstances the improbable relation-

ship of the farmer's widow and the gun-bearer commenced.

The tensions resulting from the Western cultural intrusion into the heartland of the African bush is, however, well captured in the degree of ignorance displayed by the Plomers, in the attempt to maintain "Western standards" by Lutter and in the pervading fear of the threatening wilderness that the white characters (with the exception of Hurt) all portray. He is the only character truly at home in the bush.

Musically, the work has considerable merit. Temmingh's writing for his small orchestral force is assured, achieving considerable harmonic and melodic complexity through quasi-minimalist and frequently serial-derived writing, which he aptly terms neo-tonal. His setting of text is frequently pertinent, but there are also moments of unnecessarily mannered writing that stand out as being heterogenous.

Tidboald conducted with steady assurance and the orchestral contribution was generally rewarding.

Of the singers, Eagar was an assured Hurt, methodically doing things his way, open to the elemental inspiration of a wild thunderstorm or

Visually, musically appealing *Sacred* is often confusing

DEON IRISH



SACRED BONES: Marita Napier as Bessie Lutter and John Eagar as Robin Hurt, leader of the Plomer expedition, who appear in the new opera *Sacred Bones* at the Nico.

an attractive and available lady. Christie is the suitably uptight academic, hopelessly out of his metier. Van Zyl impressed with some fine singing in portraying a woman touched by, and reacting to, the impetuses of a compelling environment. And Mvinjelwa drew a neat portrayal of a man on the cusp of two competing social systems. Napier's portrayal of the tough Bessie Lutter was less than convincing, not because of any failure on her part so much as the improbability of a deal of the character and the quite hopeless wig that made her resemble Annelise Rothenberg on safari. Come on, chaps, this is a hardbitten *vrouw* of the bushveld, not a Sandton bushveld weekender.

In other respects, the production is visually appealing, with a delightfully evocative set and good costuming. Lighting (and rain) effects were good too.

The production is, in all, a challenging one and provides considerable interest to all concerned with the on-going development of South African music and theatre. However, one is left with the feeling that it requires fleshing out and that this is but the essence of a larger work, waiting its creators' further attentions.

A SPLENDID CONTRIBUTION TO SA OPERA

SACRED BONES

Reviewed by Peter Klatzow

Given the present cultural climate, it would seem to be foolhardy to write a brand new opera. You need a blind faith in the genre itself to start with, and this must be backed up with the assurance that you are not going to invest months of creative time in a project which may not reach the boards.

So it is deeply heartening that Roelof Temmingh and Michael Williams have brought to life not only a splendid contribution to opera itself, but also one ideally conceived to address South African audiences. It is a musical thriller with overtones of *Murder, She Wrote* set deep in the African bush on border country. It all takes place in one fraught act (rather like Strauss's *Salome*), and is over in 90 minutes.

Surtitles provide easy access to the words, which is helpful, as one needs to listen to things other than diction. The characters are all very well defined, from the bibulous Bessie Lutter (sung by Marita Napier) to the frustrated and alluring Kathleen Plomer (sung by Isabelle van Zyl). John Eager offers plenty of machismo as Robin Hurt, last of the Great White Hunters, and Fikile Mvinjelwa is exceptionally effective as Naru, the faithful servant with a dark agenda of his own.

I am NOT going to give away the plot, which has some unpredictable twists. Williams is a good story teller, and this is a very good story. Yes, there are overtones of Somerset Maugham in the dramatic development as a whole, but I have no problem with that. It remains Williams' own story in the end. Williams' real talent however lies in being able to offer his composer words of such quality that they simply cry out for music. This is a talent so rare that it places Williams' contribution to the opera on a pinnacle of its own. This is a libretto written by someone passionate about opera and its possibilities. Time and again that simple fact shines through.

I don't detect the same passion in Temmingh. He is a master of composition in the best of senses, writes with ease and fluency (perhaps too much) and completed the composition

in under two months. Personally I find it unimportant to know that Mozart completed *Idomeneo* in a week while travelling in a stage coach. That in itself wouldn't explain why it is not his best opera. In Temmingh's case he not only fathered the opera but twins as well (on St Cecilia's day, bless them!) and continued his demanding year-end duties at the University of Stellenbosch. Since Temmingh devotes about a third of his programme note to the speed and pressure of production, I mention them in passing. But in the end they are (and must be) irrelevant to the final assessment.

What Temmingh has brought to the opera is a superbly crafted score. He has a very secure musical language which has been extended by some modest forays into minimalism. This in itself is interesting when you realise that minimalism in music struck roots with Steve Reich's exploration of Kenyan drumming techniques. So, in a very real sense, minimalism has come home. This imparts an African flavour to Temmingh's score in spite of his self-made promise not to combine Western and African music "in whichever way".

At all times Temmingh has captured mood and provided the singers with plenty of opportunity for vocal character portrayal. The orchestral contribution underlines the drama with some powerful percussion writing and lean, hungry textures. There are no Liebestods for anyone in this score. Those passages in the text which would normally be set as *recitativo secco* are left as plain speech so that the dramatic direction never gets clogged up.

Two particular moments stand out as memorable. The arias "I could smell him then" and "When someone you love dies" rise above the general level of the music, both bringing poignancy and intimacy to the score.

As usual, Peter Cazalet has provided a set of ravishing design and colour (how lucky we are to have him!) superbly lit by Malcolm Hurrell. David Krugel's choreography provides some very idiomatic leaping, admirably executed given that these are singers, not dancers.

This review is necessarily about the work, not the performance. But it must be said that both Temmingh and Williams are admirably served by a cast headed by John Eager as the White Hunter, at home only in the bush, foiled by Fikile Mvinjelwa, blood brother to the hunter but whose tribal instincts are unquenchable. Isabelle van Zyl brings her ravishing presence and voice to the part of Kathleen Plomer, and Marita Napier does wonders with a part that is not (for her!) exceptionally demanding.

So here we are, then! A brand new opera, in an unmistakably African setting, with music commissioned by the Arts and Culture Trust of the President. Temmingh and Williams have already proved themselves with *Enoch, Prophet of God*. The new opera is, in every way, an advance on that first attempt. How audiences react to the indigenisation of this very European art form may be an indication of the future hope of opera in this country.

Or will it be *Carmen* forever? ♦

Accessible safari opera

O T H E R
t h a n
Mahler's
Fifth Symphony
most of the seri-
ous music at the festival has been of a
chamber nature.'

SACRED BONES
reviewed by André Louw

This is perhaps the direction music in South Africa will take in the immediate future as state subsidies fall away.

Opera is such an adaptable form — this will not be the first time it has taken the chamber route. But as a "safari opera" *Sacred Bones* is probably a first.

Michael Williams's expressive libretto draws five archetypal characters: Robin Hurt (John Eager) the hunter, doing what he does best; Naru (Fikile Mvinjelva) his sidekick, torn between two different cultures; Professor John Plomer (Gordon Christie) the client, focused on his search for bones from antiquity; his wife Kathleen (Isabella van Zyl) open to new surroundings, experiences and the charms of the hunter and Bessie Lutter (Marita Napier) the murdered farmer's widow tied to the land, come what may.

A small chorus plays diverse groups — not always made clear. Their ensembles were well sung and projected.

Finding the bones does not bring the professor the expected enlightenment. As the plot unfolds his world of cer-

tainities disinte-
grates. Having
surtitles made fol-
lowing the text (in
English) that
much easier but distracted the ear and
eye from stage and pit where members
of the Cape Town Philharmonic
Orchestra under David Tidboald gave a
fine account of the score.

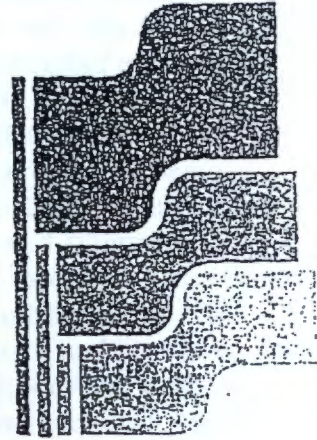
A uniformly strong cast sang and acted with conviction. Marita Napier was impressive in a wide-ranging role. Fikile Mvinjelva projected a warmth throughout his registers.

Staging and effects were well realised. Temmingh's score was accessible — long, arching melodies, interesting orchestral details and colouring.

One more hearing and the audience would leave the theatre humming the tunes. (Seems to be the criterion for success.)

As in Enoch prophet of God, Temmingh's earlier opera, there is sometimes a static quality that restrains the music. One longs for that passionate sweep that grips the heart.

Excellent festival fare. It is heartening that a recording will soon be available. A pity that the recording grant did not extend to a video recording to make this interesting new piece more widely available.



Standard
Bank
National
Arts
Festival

Opera

CUE, Thursday 10 July 1997

An opera with a surprise

BY BEN WIKNER: *Cue*

THE FESTIVAL is the place where stereotypes are broken. *Sacred Bones*, directed by Fred Abrahamse, is the world's first safari opera. This is vintage entertainment with a difference!

Michael Williams, the bush opera's librettist and 1994 Standard Bank Young Artist award winner, has no doubts that local is definitely lekker.

In a recent interview in *Uka Magazine*, Williams said, "You are so much more exposed when working on a new African opera and the sad thing is that in South Africa there is a massive tendency to be doubtful of our own cre-

ative ability. If the product is from overseas it is great, when it is local it is inferior. People think that local cannot be good."

For his libretto, Williams drew inspiration from books on nature and life dramas in the bush, including books like *Out of Africa* by Karen Blixen and *The Hanging Tree* by David Lambkin.

Sacred Bones revolves around a passionate meditation on love and betrayal. Just to whet the appetite, it is about the experience of four members of an expedition journeying to the "border".

The expedition sets out to investigate ancient fossils and their relevance to modern man.

Nieuwoudt farm is the expedition's destination and here the frontier's woman — who witnessed her husband's death — waits for her lover to save her from the chaos threatening to destroy her.

Celebrated soprano, Marita Napier leads a professional cast which includes John Eager, Isabella van Zyl, Gordon Christie and Fikile Mvinjelva.

The 15 players from the Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra play a score composed by Roelof Temmingh. The orchestra will be conducted by British-born conductor David Tidboald.

Sacred Bones premiered at the Nicc Malan Opera House in Cape Town on June 14.

South Africa White mischief

Cape Town

Sacred Bones is Roelof Temmingh's second opera (*Enoch, Prophet of God* being his first), and, like *Enoch*, it deals with an African theme; in fact, 'An African Safari' would seem an appropriate sub-title. It is an 80-minute chamber opera for five soloists, a male chorus of six, accompanied by a chamber orchestra of 17 players. The premiere at the NICO THEATRE (June 14) showed that Temmingh has produced a score of imaginative colour, and, if not actually brimful of memorable music, a largely successful amalgam of Western and African elements.

The stumbling block seems, however, to lie in the plot and ultimately in Michael Williams's libretto: a kind of allegory which soon becomes heavily weighed down with its often commonplace clichés and predictable rhetoric. The story is superficially straightforward: a palaeontologist professor and his bored wife are on an expedition, hoping to uncover a connection between modern man's capacity for violence and the behaviour of our primitive ancestors. They are accompanied by a white hunter and seven black men (who variously portray bearers, poachers, bandits, and shadows of the bush), the head of whom is loyally linked to the hunter. In the wild they rendezvous with a white South African widow of a farmer killed by marauders. The professor's wife is attracted to the hunter and the plot moves swiftly and inexorably to its tragic denouement. The danger of such a story line is that it has all the pitfalls of the obvious: the African bush is seen as beautiful and cruel, the white settlers as interlopers, and the Africans themselves unsure whether they are part of the old or new way of life.

The singers all made the most of what they had. John Eager (Robin Hurt) looked every inch the Great White Hunter, Isabelle van Zyl (Kathleen Plomer), the beautiful, frustrated wife, and Gordon Christie (John Plomer), the wimpish, neurotic professor. The character of Bessie Lutter, played by Marita Napier, offers some kind of acting challenge: a cross between a Cassandra and something out of *Waiting for Godot*, and in her characterization she brought out the various elements of pathos, cynicism, with an occasional touch of wry humour. Some of the best singing of the evening, however, came from Fikile Mvinjelwa (Naru, Hurt's servant and companion) who seemed most at home in both the musical and dramatic demands of the opera.

The conductor, David Tidboald, produced persuasive playing from the chamber orchestra and, assisted by Malcolm Hurrell's lighting, Peter Cazalet's evocative designs captured the changing moods of Africa. Fred Abrahamse directed, though his ingenuity must have been hard stretched to try to breathe life into so inanimate a thing.

BARRY SMITH

'Buchuland' 'n SA opera van helende hoop

3 MAY 98 RAAI PAK 7

Deur **PAUL BOEKHOOF: Johannesburg**

BUCHU, met sy delikate wit of pienk blomme, is 'n inheemse kruid wat in baie dele van Suid-Afrika gevind word. Die naam kom van die Kot-taal, terwyl die Koll-stamme die eerste was wat dié plant se helende vermoëns ontdek het.

Hierdie kruid se genesekragtige potensiaal word gebruik as 'n metafoor vir die eerste vollengte nuwe Suid-Afrikaanse opera wat in Pretoria se Staatsteater opgevoer gaan word.

Dié opera is *Buchuland*, gegrond op 'n libretto deur Michael Williams, met musiek deur Roelof Temmingh. Die werk is in drie bedrywe en sal in Engels en Afrikaans gesing word. Daar sal vyf opvoerings wees: op 22, 25, 27, 29 en 31 Julie. David Scarr, die Suid-Afrikaner wat die afgelepe agt jaar in Wenen woon en werk, sal die opera se wêreldpremière dirigeer.

Buchuland is die land van die Buchulanders, 'n gebied wat aan hulle deur die verre koningin Victoria van Engeland in die negentiende eeu beloof is. Hulle het dit in ontvangs geneem, maar dié grond is van hulle weggeneem in die twintigste eeu.

Buchuland is ook die naam van 'n sendingstasie in die Elands-

ke boer te verkoop. Die besluit om tot dié stap oor te gaan, is ook geneem omdat die inwoners van Citrusdal en verskeie boere gekla het omdat die Elandsdowers druk op dié gebied se arbeidsmark geplaas het weens hul teenstand teen lae lone.

In die beste tradisie van die bedryf-opera, word hier aan die bestanddele van liefde, konflik en oplossing voldoen. Ds. Venter se daad van goedhartigheid 35 jaar later, wanneer die inwoners deur die bemiddeling van die Hof vir Grondeise op 15 Desember 1996 na hul land van 3 100 hektaar kan terugkeer, bring 'n katarsis en verdien vergewing.

Die groter politieke en maatskaplike kwessies domineer egter nie *Buchuland* se gegewe nie. Dwaarsdeur die opera loop daar ook dié verhaal van die minnaars, Katrina en Titus, die verskillende intriges rondom die inwoners, en dan Kolkat, die luiperd wat die heuwels rondom die sendingstasie teen indringers bewaak.

Michael Williams is deur 'n foto in 'n koerant geïnspireer om 'n roman rondom dié gebeurte te skryf, maar soos die noodlot dit wou hê, het dit 'n opera geword wat in opdrag van ISME (die International Society for Music Education) geskryf is. Dié vereniging hou juis sy 23ste tweejaarlikse wêreldkonfe-

rensie tussen 19 en 25 Julie in Pretoria.

Daar was drie kriteria waaraan dié opdrag moes voldoen: die inhoud van die opera moes Suid-Afrikaans wees, dit moes die verskeidenheid van die mense van Suid-Afrika weerspieël en die opera moes die gees van vreedsame verandering in die nuwe Suid-Afrika beliggams.

Williams, wat reeds twee korter Suid-Afrikaanse operas die lig laat sien het, naamlik *Enoch*, *Prophet of God* en *Sacred Bones*, wou dié keer nie die donker en ernstige tema van dié twee operas herhaal nie, maar 'n ligter, hoopvoller werk skryf.

Dié librettoskrywer, wat ook die regie van *Buchuland* sal behartig, beskryf die werk as "... 'n romantiese komiese opera met 'n ingeboude gelukkige einde. Daar is ook heelwat aksie op die verhoog, soos 'n hofspraak, die afbrand van 'n dorp, 'n opmars teen die regering, 'n reënstorm, die jag op die luiperd, Kolkat, en selfs 'n sekstoneel in die bos omring deur vuur.

"In die slotbedryf, 35 jaar later, word die fokus op die verkiesing van 1994 geplaas en 'n deel van die bedryf speel in 'n Hüllbrowse nagklub af. Daar is dus enorme toneelveranderinge binne elke bedryf.

"Die komponis, Roelof Tem-

mingh, is my swaer en hy het vir dié opera heeltemal van sy gebruike ernstig-akademiese styl afgesien en toeganklik-romantiese musiek geskryf. Dit is lig, soms dramaties en dit is deurgaans melodieryk.

"Wat ons ook gedoen het, is om 'n aantal bekende FAK-liedjies en gevestigde gesange te gebruik sodat die gehoor in die loop van die opera verskeie verwysingspunte vir hulself kan ontdek," verduidelik die regisseur.

Ook die feit dat daar tussen ses- en tagtig mense in die loop van die drie bedrywe op die verhoog gaan wees, maak daarvan een van die mees ambisieuse operaprojekte wat ooit in Suid-Afrika aangepak is. Die stelle en kostuums word deur Peter Cazalet ontwerp en die beligting deur Stan Knight.

Die Staatsteater het reeds die name van vyf van die ses sangers in die hoofrolle bekend gemaak. Die sopraan Virginia Davids sing die rol van Katrina Bantjies, die mezzo-sopraan Sibongile Khumalo dié van Ma Bantjies, die tenoor Jammie Moolman neem die mantel van ds. Andries Venter op hom, die bariton Fikile Mvinjelwa sing Johnnie Fortuin en die bas Rouel Beukes is Ben Basson, die magistraat. Die sanger wat die rol van Titus April gaan sing, word eersdaags aangekondig.



MICHAEL WILLIAMS, wat die libretto van die opera *Buchuland* geskryf het en ook die regie sal behartig vir die wêreldpremière in Julie in die Staatsteater.

kloof, die pragtige vallei naby die Swartlandse dorpe Citrusdal. Dié sendingstasie se geestelike leier in die laat jare vyftig en vroeë jare Venter, wat vanweë politieke druk sy integriteit, sy gemeenskap en sy geloof in God verloor.

In 1962 word die seshonderd inwoners van Elandsdowle gedwing om hulself van die sendinggrond te verwyder nadat die kerk besluit het om Elandsdowle aan 'n plaasli-

THE WORLD PREMIERE OF *BUCHULAND*

Reviewed by Julius Eichbaum

As we move inexorably towards the dawn of a new millennium, it is a sobering thought to realise that despite the advent of the CD, long playing records, video, radio and television, the average person today knows less about the music of his own century than did his counterpart 100 years ago.

The mere fact that our own age has seen the birth of fewer enduring musical compositions than our forebears did, places the contemporary reviewer in an invidious position. When faced with an all too rare world premiere of an important new composition, does the reviewer throw caution to the winds and hail the work unreservedly as a masterpiece? Or, does he run the risk of joining the ranks of so many other critics before him, who are chiefly remembered for having predicted that works such as *La traviata*, *Carmen* or *The Rite of Spring* were rubbish and could not possibly enjoy enduring popularity?

Given the fact that very few new operas are being written today - even in Italy, where, 400 years ago this year, the history of opera began - the birth of a new South African opera from the pen of a composer and a librettist who have already produced two other major operatic works, should be cause for rejoicing. Even allowing for the odd new work which emerges from the USA, such as the recent opera, *Harvey Milk*, South Africa, thanks to the efforts of composer Roelof Temmingh and his librettist, Michael Williams, is certainly at the forefront of the relatively few nations that still believe that opera is not altogether dead as an art form and continues to produce new works.

Having attended the world premiere of *Buchuland* at the State Theatre on 21 July, a work especially commissioned by the UNISA Music Foundation and the State Theatre for the 23rd World Conference of the International Society of Music Educators, held for the first time this year in South Africa, let me state at the outset that this opera is a marked improvement over its two predecessors, *Enoch, Prophet of God* and *Sacred Bones*, which flowed from the creative pens of Temmingh and Williams. *Buchuland* is a more substantial work, with a great deal more to offer in musical and dramatic terms than either of its predecessors.

For his libretto, Michael Williams drew inspiration from the true story of the residents of Elandskloof, a valley near the Swartland town of Citrusdal, who were forcibly removed from their homes in 1962 when the Dutch Reformed Church sold

Curtis Rayam as Titus April, Virginia Davids as Katrina Bantjies and Jannie Moolman as Ds Andries Venter.



what had once been mission land. On 15 December 1996, the land was returned to the original Elandskloof community as part of the current land restitution programme. This makes the opera pertinent to contemporary South African life.

The people of Buchuland are a diverse lot. We have the Buchulanders the young and in-love Titus April (Curtis Rayman) and Katrina Bantjies (Virginia Davids), Ma Bantjies (Sibongile Khumalo) and her suitor Sappie Dirks (Xolela Sixaba), and the smooth talking man from the city, Johnnie Fortuin (Fikile Mvinjelwa). Then there is the greedy farmer Cornelius van der Merwe (Eric Visser), the magistrate Ben Basson (Rouel Beukes) and the dominee Andries Venter (Jannie Moolman).

It is the latter who experiences a loss of faith, tormented by the decision taken by his church to sell the Buchulander's land. Even though the community are unwilling to accept the sale of their land, their protests fail. The Buchulander's homes are destroyed and they are forced to leave the land. Only Titus is prepared to stay and work for a local farmer - he will be paid one acre of land for every year he works. Katrina leaves Titus for Johnny Fortuin and the bright lights of the city. Thirty five years later Katrina is still employed by Johnny Fortuin as a hostess in his night club. It is 1994, the year of the first democratic elections in South Africa. Johnny tells Katrina that she must find another job as he is closing his club. She reads in the paper that the Buchulanders have applied to the Land Claims Court for the return of their land. At the public meeting of the Buchulanders, Katrina and Titus, who is now a wealthy farmer, meet again and discover that they still love one another. The land is returned to the people of Buchuland. The dominee Andries Venter arrives and blesses Buchuland and South Africa.

In the programme notes, composer Roelof Temmingh comments on the music of Buchuland: "The music of Buchuland therefore, to a certain extent, joins the centuries old mainstream of Western (ie. world) music. The most important difference is that it is music without the traditional leading notes and dominants because the major and minor modes have to a great extent been replaced by an octotonic mode of consecutive half and whole tones. The combination of the three modes that is thus created consists of twelve inherent, moveable tone centres which make the play with New Tonality a game for which rules are not easily formulated. It has nothing to do with serial compulsion or the hierarchy of tonal functions. The EAR is the only arbitrator. The possibilities are endless. The act of composition is free of any adherence to prescribed rules. It glides around in music's most inspiring domain: the great carefree world between the old, distant boundaries of tonality and atonality."

Buchuland must be regarded as being something of a milestone in the history of South African opera development. Yet, the work still falls far short of the ideal. Virtually the entire vocal line is declamatory in style, somewhat in the style of the operas of Benjamin Britten, whose music and mood setting ability so readily springs to mind at virtually every turn of the page. Indeed, I often felt that much of the score of *Buchuland* resembled a watered down version of *Peter Grimes*, only lacking Britten's more rewarding pano-

ply of tonal colouring and the overall richness of his palette.

The main fault with *Buchuland* lies in the fact that it is overly long - especially the first act. Secondly, the work is lacking in structure which, one suspects is largely the result of the creative team's attempt at creating an overall musical historical documentary of the plight of the Buchulanders as a whole, rather than allowing one or two characters to focus attention on the overall story through their own intense emotions and experiences. After all, if one looks at the great operas in the current repertoire, one finds real or fictional events or historical settings being effectively portrayed as a backdrop to the thoughts and emotions of the principal characters, rather than allowing the larger concept to swamp the individual. Thus, we experience ancient Egypt through the intense distillation of the experiences of Aida and Radames whilst Mascagni effectively conveys to us Sicilian life through the eyes and experiences of Santuzza and Turridu in *Cavalleria Rusticana*. In short, Williams' libretto is too ambitious and embodies far too many characters with the result that few, if any of them, are allowed to develop fully.

This overly ambitious objective impacts negatively on Temmingh's ability to structure each scene and each act in a manner one is accustomed to finding in most other operas and which sees each scene or act as having a clear focal point, both in terms of music and drama. Each scene in Wagner's *Ring* cycle has its dramatic and musical highpoint and this is particularly the case in a relatively modern opera, such as Britten's *Peter Grimes*.

Buchuland contains many fine elements and ideas which could - and should, in my opinion - be refined into a, shorter, more tautly structured piece. Despite its faults it is, nevertheless, a positive step in the right direction on the part of a team who, if not of the same calibre of Strauss and Hofmannsthal, clearly enjoy the same degree of artistic rapport and from whom, I have no doubt, will ultimately flow the quintessential South African opera.

The standard of singing was excellent throughout, especially Virginia David's heartfelt characterisation of the role of Katrina Bantjies. Jannie Moolman excelled in the role of the dominee, Andries Venter whilst Rouel Beukes was a powerful and commanding Ben Basson, the magistrate. Sadly, Sibongile Khumalo's role as Ma Bantjies was not something which allowed this fine singer to display her talents to the fullest. In the role of Titus April, American tenor, Curtis Rayman sang and acted well although I felt that the part needed a singer with a richer, more ringing vocal timbre.

The minor roles were all well cast and the chorus sang with enthusiasm and verve. David Scarr conducted the NAPOP Orchestra with insight and great sensitivity.

Peter Cazalet's sets were captivating and brilliantly captured the harsh, yet strangely and hauntingly beautiful Buchuland landscape. His use of nearly the full depth of the Opera stage lent a marvellous degree of perspective to the setting and Stan Knight's lighting design brought to the entire production a wonderful evocative feeling. *Buchuland* was generously sponsored by Nedbank, Nederburg and South African Airways Voyager. ●

SA opera makes deep impression

By Sonnyboy Jon Gumede

TAKE a true rural South African story from the last 35 years, weave in a love story, betrayals, broken promises and lost faith, and you have the makings of a world class opera. And *Buchuland* is just that.

The love story is not only one between a man and a woman, but also a rural community's deep love for the land they live on.

Titus April (sung by American Curtis Rayam) and Katrina Bantjies (Virginia Davids) are in love with each other, until Johnnie Fortuin (Fikile Mvinjelwa) with his city experience seduces Katrina away from Buchuland.

He also brings the bad news that the church has sold the land on which the community lived. The community realises that it is their own dominee who has betrayed them, and their rejection of him means that he is unable to pray with a clear conscience again.

The eviction scene, in which the community's homes are burnt down along with most of their worldly possessions, is truly dramatic and heart-rending.

Indeed, it is almost too realistic to watch without tears and bitter memories flooding one's soul.

In contrast, the final act starts with the 1994 general election and overflows with hope for the future.

The story moves on to include the Land Claims Act and the possibility of the people returning to their land. In the end Titus and Katrina are reunited, the community returns to the land and the dominee can pray again.

The opera is directed by Michael William (who also wrote the words). The music was written by Roelof Temmingh and has vague echoes of Gershwin and Benjamin Britten coming through.

He cleverly incorporates phrases from *God Save The Queen* as well as some traditional South African songs.

Resounding success

Virginia Davids excels as Katrina. Rayam manages to get his tongue around the occasional Afrikaans word and is generally an imposing presence on the stage with an equally imposing voice.

Jannie Moolman as dominee Venter conveys his compassion for the community, his doubts in God, his weakness in bowing to the pressure of the local white community, his fight on behalf of the Buchulanders to get their land back with convincing authenticity and a fine tenor voice.

The world premiere last Wednesday at the State Theatre of this locally produced opera, was resounding success.

The sponsors, Nedbank, Nederburg and South African Airways, are to be congratulated on the foresight in supporting this indigenous work.



Mvinjelwa stars in *Buchuland*.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

I write these programme notes the weekend before rehearsals begin on this my tenth opera. On Monday I will return to rehearsal room 4E, the same room where ten years ago I rehearsed and performed my first opera, *The Milkbird*, an African fable for six voices, with a simple percussion accompaniment aimed at introducing the concept of opera to young people. On Monday, however, I will face a cast of seventy people, including some of the country's finest soloists and begin working on a score written, I believe, by South Africa's preeminent opera composer, telling a South African story of love and betrayal. The challenge to get the opera right far outweighs the fear of its failure. For such artistic endeavours, as creating and staging a three act indigenous opera, are rare indeed in this country. The necessity then, to express our national character, our history, our love stories through an art form where music and drama are one and indivisible is my primary aim. Capturing a South African motif through the synthesis of music and drama will, I suspect, be a life long fascination.

Buchuland. An opera which began as a whimsical longing of a committee for "something South African", a story that "we can all identify with", a piece expressing the "spirit of reconciliation" in this land. Dangerous territory, I'm sure you will agree. Yet is this longing not a valid ambition, an ideal worthy of pursuing? So when I stumbled upon my theme of land dispossession, of a promise made, broken and restored, and visited the people of Elandskloof, scoured the newspapers for similar stories and spoke to friends who had personal experiences, I found the characters of the opera presented themselves to me and dictated the beginning, the middle and - something the composer was very happy to reach - the outcome of their own story.

But now I wear my directing cap and put aside the images I searched for as a librettist concerned only



The abandoned Pastorie (Parsonage)

with a lyric, and seek to rediscover what the piece *actually* means and what it *really* wants to say. Peter Cazalet has designed a fine representation of the country veld and the Buchuland Mission Station square where most of the drama unfolds. The key then to the directing style comes from the *verismo* setting and the down to earth nature of the people who inhabit the mission station. These are real characters, whom I've met and interviewed. Of course the very nature of opera gives one licence to enlarge the poetic scope of the characters psyche, but hopefully this won't distract an audience from identifying with all those people living in Buchuland.

The New Tonality of Roelof's music, a recent development in his compositional style, can perhaps also be described as a new focus on simplicity and melody, and is therefore a perfect complement to this pastoral story. In the text I have incorporated an Afrikaans folk song, a well-known hymn and two age-old children's songs, which Roelof has woven into the score. This gives the effect of meeting old friends in a new environment.

It is always somewhat of a little miracle for me to hear how the pages and pages of my dead text are transformed and brought to life through Roelof's artistry. A little miracle always worth listening to.

I wonder if ten years from today there will be ten more South African operas?

Michael Williams

21 June 1998

SHOWTIME | Unfailingly absorbing



VIRGINIA DAVIDS as Katrina Bantjies and CURTIS RAYAM as Titus April

IT is quite an event to welcome a new, full-length South African opera on an indigenous subject, and all concerned, whether as creators or interpreters, must be congratulated on the outcome.

The story of Buchu-land, which is based on real events, is of unfailingly absorbing interest to South Africans, and perhaps to foreigners. I do believe, however, that the social, emotional, political and financial resonances of the story are only fully appreciable by a South African who has grown up in circumstances contemporary with the events described.

Sentimental

The libretto by Michael Williams, (which, helpfully, is printed in the programme) is lucid, concise, and seldom sentimental. Williams is also the director of the production. The music is by

OPERA: Buchu-land (State Theatre)
 PRINCIPALS: Virginia Davids, Sibongile Khumalo, Curtis Rayam, Rouel Beukes. Jannie Moolman, Fikile Mvinjelwa
 DIRECTOR: Michael Williams
 CONDUCTOR: David Scarr, with the New Arts Philharmonic Orchestra Pretoria and the State Theatre Opera Chorus

By Michael Traub

Roelof Temmingh.

His idiom is plain, occasionally forceful; the vocal lines for the solo singers are written mostly in *arioso* style which blossoms into full aria style now and again; the orchestration is transparent, not to say thin.

In order to identify the musical content, one might say that there are signs of the influence of Hindemith, Britten and Menotti (to mention just three 20th-Century composers), yet Temmingh's music has a strong individuality, coming mainly from its basically slow tempi (in fact, too much of the score is *Molto Moderato*) and unadventurous harmonic language -

the latter only slightly chromatic, seldom far removed from diatonicism. There are too many sequences of shifting harmonic planes, a compositional device that can become a mannerism, as it does to some extent here.

There is not a weak link among the singers.

Imported

All the principals, as listed above, are South Africans, barring Curtis Rayam, who is imported from the US. He takes the role of Titus April with great dramatic conviction and steady singing (and scarcely a trace of his native American accent).

Opposite him, Virginia Davids gives one of her

best characterisations. Katrina Bantjies, singing with a rich, full, and with a refulgent tone as creating a commanding stage-presence, on a par with her Magda Sorel. Menotti's The Consul, Sibongile Khumalo: Ma Bantjies has the recent signs of vocal strain, I am happy to report.

Rouel Beukes as Be Basson, the magistrate; Eric Visser as Cornelis van der Merwe, the landowner of Buchu-land, and Jannie Moolman as Andrieu Venter, the domineer, all thoroughly immerse in their characterisation as the three European protagonists.

Fikile Mvinjelwa is likeable Johnny Fortuin a pedlar and later small-scale entrepreneur.

The sets and costume by Peter Cazalet are absolutely authentic, and the lighting design by Stan Knight complements the action closely (although with too much murk at times - admittedly demanded by the story but a strain to watch).

The State Theatre Opera Chorus sings and moves well (and their make-up is a triumph).

Imprecise

A few choral passages of imprecise ensemble with the orchestra is of little moment.

The New Arts Philharmonic Orchestra Pretoria (what a mouthful!) plays well under the baton of David Scarr, who directs the musical proceedings with decisiveness.

I urge opera-lovers to see this production, which continues for the rest of July.

This land is our land

Coenraad Visser

Love and land. Love that is stolen; land that is stolen. Thirty-five years later, love that is returned; land that is returned. "A promise made, broken, and then restored." That, according to Michael Williams, librettist and producer, is the simple theme of Roelof Temmingh's new opera, *Buchuland*, which opens at the State Theatre in Pretoria on July 22.

Buchuland tells the true story of the Klansklaw community, forcibly removed in 1962 from their land near Middelburg when the Dutch Reformed Church sold what had once been mission land. In December 1996, the Klansklawers became the first community to own land restored by the Land Claims Court.

For some in the cast, *Buchuland*, with its tale of deprivation and forced removal, is the story of their lives. Soprano Virginia Davids and her family were evicted from their Parow home in the early Sixties. Recently, her father lodged a claim to recover what had once been the family home.

But *Buchuland* is about more than political transformation and justice for those who lost their land during the apartheid years. Equally hopeful, it is the story of the love of Katrina Bantjies and Titus April, a love that triumphs on Katrina's return to Buchuland, after she had been lured to the city lights by the smooth-talking Johnnie Fortuin.

When Williams wrote his libretto, he knew that for the first time in the history of South African opera a new work would be mounted on the



Optimistic opera: Fikile Mvinjelwa is Johnnie Fortuin in *Buchuland*. PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN ROBINSON

large stage of an opera house. (His previous major collaboration with brother-in-law Temmingh, *Enoch, Prophet of God*, played on the smaller Nico Malan drama stage.) To sustain audience interest, the libretto is packed with swift action and the portrayal of sweeping emotions.

Written mainly in English, it is spiced judiciously with Afrikaans. Afrikaans appears not only in the hymn *As Hy Weer Kom* and the traditional song *O Nooi van die Velde*, but also lends emphasis to key moments in the opera and serves as a reminder that these victims of

apartheid were Afrikaners too.

Temmingh, for long one of South Africa's most prolific and inventive composers, has written a passionate score that matches Williams's large-scale conception. A far cry from Temmingh's temple-storming days in the Seventies and early Eighties, *Buchuland* looks through the musical lenses of the Eighties and the Nineties back at the 17th and 19th centuries.

To match Williams's uncomplicated libretto, and in line with the love/dualism of the opera's main themes, Temmingh often wrote for two voices only. While this more

transparent musical texture exposes the composer more cruelly and so poses a far greater challenge, Temmingh believes that it lends greater focus and dramatic weight to the score.

Unlike the traditional musical language of opera, that *Buchuland* is without the customary leading notes and dominants, except for the rare occasion when Temmingh added them for special effect. An octotonic mode of consecutive half and whole tones replaces the traditional minor and major modes, although, according to Temmingh, the mood is distinctly expressively

minor, not "boringly" major.

The combination of the three possible modes which are created by the use of the octotonic mode consists of 12 movable tone centres. Their use cannot be regulated easily. "The act of composition," says Temmingh, "glides around in music's most inspiring domain — the great carefree world between the old, distant boundaries of tonality and atonality."

Like the free-flowing verse of the libretto, which creates its own rhythm, the music consists of a series of building blocks, each with its own melodic and rhythmic structure.

Temmingh and Williams consider themselves fortunate to work in a creative environment with so many stories to tell, and so many of them with happy endings. They note that composers in Europe are casting about for suitable themes; those they find often feel depression only. Temmingh compares the optimistic nature of *Buchuland* with Schnittke's *The Idiot*, a bleak three-hander in which one character does nothing but grunt for the duration of the opera.

The cast assembles the undisputed cream of the local crop — Virginia Davids (Katrina Bantjies), Sibongile Khumalo (Ma Bantjies), Roelof Reukes (Ben Bassou), Jannie Moolman (Andries Venter) and Fikile Mvinjelwa (Johnnie Fortuin). Odd one out is American tenor Curtis Rayam as Titus April, a part originally conceived for Sidwell Hartman. Vienna-based David Scarr returns home to conduct the New Arts Philharmonic Orchestra of Pretoria.

Buchuland is on at the State Theatre at 8pm on July 22, 25, 27, 29 and 31.



APPENDIX D

Love & Green Onions

- Carew, D. 2001. 'Opera that's not an opera' has it all, *Sunday Argus*: 16, July 21/22.
- Chisholm, F. 2001. Première tonight of Zakes Mda's operatic love tale, *The Cape Times*: 9, June 28.
- Fourie, C. 2001. Eclectic new musical could be a trendsetter for future productions, *The Cape Argus*: July 25. (See appendix D: 3-5)
- Mabanga, T. 2001. Mda goes to the opera, *Mail & Guardian*: 6, June 8-14.
- Wasserman, H. 2001. Jazz of nie, eiesoortige opera bly 'n mens by, *Die Burger*: 4, July 2.

Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu

- Ballantine, C. 2002. Opera for Africa, *Opera*. 53: 950-954.
- Cameron, M. 2004. Cast delights despite 'Magogo's' shortcomings, *Chicago Tribune*: Sec 5, June 7.
- Delacoma, W. 2004. S. African opera is promising start to Ravinia's 100th, *Chicago Sun*: 28A, June 6.
- Grant, J. 2004. From the Zulu nation to the heart of Chicago, *Financial Times*: June 1. (See appendix D: 15)
- Midgette, A. 2004. An aria for post-apartheid Africa, *New York Times*: 23-24, May 30.
- Richardson, K. 2002. 'Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu', *Opera Now*. 6: 108.
- Tommasini, A. 2004. Varied cultures entwine around a Zulu princess, *New York Times*: 3, June 2.
- Von Rhein, J. 2004. Zulu opera makes U.S. première, *Chicago Tribune*: 1,13, May 30.

Earthdiving

- Chisholm, F. 2003. A celebration of life spirit, *Mail & Guardian*: March 15. (See appendix D: 24-25)
- Fourie, C. 2003. Opera music hits discord, *The Cape Argus*: 5, March 11.
- Gilder, A. 2003. 'earthdiving' opera sees Cekwana back in SA, *The Cape Times*: 7, March 6.
- Kooij, P. 2003. Nuwe opera vol emosie, *Die Burger*: 4, March 10.
- Snyman, W. 2003. New African work of art hits high note, *The Cape Times*: 7, March 11.
- Willoughby, G. 2003. Bravo! Spier opera season in full voice, *Mail & Guardian*: 1, March 14-19.

'Opera that's not an opera' has it all

Douglas Carew

YOU'LL experience brutality, tragedy, gentleness and humour – and come out humming a tune, maybe even three or four.

That's the guarantee provided by Michael Williams, writer and director of *Love and Green Onions*, a jazz opera based on South African author Zakes Mda's award-winning novel *Ways of Dying*.

A self-confessed "opera freak", this is Williams's 10th libretto. He is also an award-winning writer of crime fiction.

His novels are published by Oxford University Press. Its chief executive officer, Kate McCullum, planted the seed which grew into *Love and Green Onions*.

Williams said: "Zakes's books are also published by OUP and Kate said, 'You know, this could make a great musical.'

"So I re-read the book and thought 'that's not a bad idea'. There is love, hope despair, tragedy, triumph – all the quintessential elements needed for musical land."

Mda's M-Net Book prize winner tells the story of Toloki and his odyssey. It takes him from a rural village to the shabby, vibrant outskirts of a South African city, where he meets Noria. The tenderness that springs between them helps to heal the bitterness of their past.

Reading the book for a second time, Williams was struck by Mda's lyrical prose. "There seems to be music on every second page and the book also has a magic realism element which is perfect for theatre, perfect for the opera," he said.

Once the decision was taken to write the opera, Williams had strong feelings on who should fill the lead roles – jazz diva Gloria Bosman and opera baritone



MAIN MAN: Fikile Mvinjelwa takes the lead in *Love and Green Onions*.

Standard Bank Young Artist award winners.

"When I approached Gloria, she told me she had been at opera school for three years, so with this role she is kind of going back to her roots," said Williams, "while I knew this was perfect for Fikile when I read the book."

The music, composed by Denzil Weale, features various styles, including jazz, kwaito, kwela and marabi.

"I approached Denzil and told him I wanted to produce a jazz, blues, opera musical and he was keen," said Williams.

"He is equally important in the creative team and musically I go with what he tells me. Denzil is on the cutting edge of jazz in this country and sometimes

Essentially, *Love and Green Onions* was a beautiful, cool and hip love story with superb singing, said Williams.

"Gloria has a jazz background, while Fikile is the country's top baritone. Their characters fall in love and in a sense you get a marriage of both musical forms."

Asked if writing *Love and Green Onions* as a musical would have made it more accessible to a mass audience, Williams said: "Who knows what opera is nowadays. One must be fluid with these forms.

"This is an opera, but not an opera. These days, crossover is the word. Denzil latched onto that and the piece moves easily between musical styles.

and *Green Onions* is in the musical theatre tradition in which the feelings and story are conveyed through song and dialogue.

"We happen to be using opera singers to tell the story. Opera relies on soul sound, it taps into your soul," said Williams.

The opera had its world premier at the Grahamstown Festival earlier this month. "On our second night in Grahamstown we had 750 people in a very mixed audience and got a standing ovation," said Williams.

He has big ambitions for the opera. "I'd like to follow what David Kramer's doing and take it to London," he said.

It has opened at the Baxter and runs until Saturday, July 28. There are 10 performances.

Première tonight of Zakes Mda's operatic love tale

FIKILE Mvinjelwa is into onions. Green ones, a euphemism for the most potent of all onions, the raw sort. **FIONA CHISHOLM** reports.

TONIGHT at the world première of the jazz opera, *Love and Green Onions*, at the Monument Theatre at Grahamstown, Cape Town Opera's leading baritone will chomp his way through green onions and pretend he loves them.

Alternate nibbles of sweet Swiss roll will help to keep his tears at bay.

For onions and Swiss roll – metaphors for sorrow and love – are the only things eaten by Toloki, the character Mvinjelwa plays in the opera based on Zakes Mda's inspiring love-fable, *Ways Of Dying*.

Michael Williams is responsible for the quirky title as well as the book, lyrics and direction of this indigenous work.

It follows the unlikely love affair between onion-eater Toloki, a man with an incredible and magical imagination, and the beautiful Maria, who is internally destroyed by suffering.

She is played by white-hot jazz star Gloria Bosman.

The music, a zippy fusion of kwaito, backbeats, kwela and marabi songs, is by Denzil Weale and will stretch the lovers, chorus of 25, nine children and the 15-strong jazz band under Graham Scott's direction.

The opera has a fairytale ending – Mvinjelwa and Bosman marry on stage. Love not only heals all and brings together two artists from entirely different worlds, but clearly shows that breath control is one of Mvinjelwa's strong suits.

Cape Times 28 June 2001

Eclectic new musical could be a trendsetter for future productions

25.07.2001 ARGUS



MEMORABLE: FIKILE MVINJELWA AND GLORIA BOSMAN IN LOVE AND GREEN ONIONS

LOVE AND GREEN ONIONS

Reviewer: Carl Fourie

DIRECTOR: Michael Williams

CAST: Fikile Mvinjelwa, Gloria Bosman, Marcus Desando

VENUE: Baxter Theatre, till Saturday

The National Arts Council must be congratulated on its initiative in commissioning this new work. And the support given by African Harvest, the Standard Bank National Arts Foundation, Oxford University Press and the Western Cape Provincial Government cannot go unnoticed either.

This composition is virtually alone in the category of "jazz opera". It invites comparison with no other opera, not even Porgy And Bess, with which it is being billed by Cape Town

serve as a trendsetter for future compositions.

The work is based on Jakes Mda's book, *Ways of Dying*. In his libretto, Michael Williams has provided ample scope for the human drama of the two-edged sword which visits so many people's lives. This aspect of the plot redeems it from being just another PC job.

However, I fail to understand the necessity for casual crudities in the text, in particular the references to bestiality and male genitals. Or was that an unsuccessful attempt at humour?

Williams also directed the work. The cast is well-trained and stage-work is comfortable. Imaginative use is made of props to create the interior of a shack, as well as of our beloved taxis!

The piece is musically eclectic and includes unaccompanied African folk songs, gospel hymn singing, sensitive jazz ballads, raunchy foot-tappers

Peter McLea orchestrated Denzil Weale's music. They fused the sounds of pennywhistles, African percussions and a more-or-less standard jazz band effortlessly. Indeed, it is amazing that the structure of opera and the vitality of a jazz orchestra have not been honed before! It seems a perfectly natural blend.

The second act needs editing; it comes across as less inspired than the first. It starts with one of two lengthy stretches of sheer talking; no music at all. This leads to rather uncomfortable drama, which, granted, needs to be reflected in the score. But here the score consists of little more than repetitious pounding of drums and long-winded, amelodic writing, where it is anyone's guess as to how vocally accurate things were. Ironically, this act also contains some of the more beautiful and memorable melodies.

Graham Scott conducted the orchestra. One wondered how often

But they stayed together well. And the relationship between them and the on-stage singers was good.

It took me a while to discern how I should be listening to this work. As an opera, the use of microphones was an anomaly. As a musical, the element of human drama was too intense! The solo voices and chorus (trained by Allan Stephenson) were not united in style, either.

The chorus had a tough time with regard to the number of styles they had to master. Vocally they did well, but the stylistically more operatic and traditional harmonic writings seemed out of step with the overall character of the work.

The role of the grief-stricken Noria was given ample oblation by Gloria Bosman. Her golden voice alone is sufficient reason to attend this production.

Her opening number, *Abide With Me*, and the later *Have You Touched the Skin* were most moving. The former displayed her talent as a jazz singer who knows how to effortlessly infuse the blues into her lines; the latter the emotional and vocal power she is capable of producing.

Marcus Desando sang *Bhut'shaddy*, a role that enabled him to prove his worth as a serious actor. His showstopper, *When I Bought This Kombi*, showed him comfortable singing with a musical-style voice. And his diction was crystal-clear, too.

Fikile Mvinjelwa had the lion's share of music to sing, and chose an operatic approach. In this he was out of step with his fellow singers and did himself a disservice. A pity, for he has a vocal and dramatic talent of note. The duet ballads *Of Course the Moon Would Shine* and *Wonderland*, sung with Bosman, were memorable moments.

The work is an interesting experi-

Reviewer: Carl Fourie

Love and Green Onions

Based on the book "Ways of Dying" by Jakes Mda

Music by Denzil Weale, and orchestration by Peter McLea

Lyrics and Direction by Michael Williams for Cape Town Opera

Conducted by Graham Scott

Chorus Master: Allan Stephenson

Soloists: Fikile Mvinjelwa, Gloria Bosman, Marcus Desando

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This composition is virtually alone in the category of "jazz opera". It invites comparison to no other opera, not even "Porgy and Bess", with which it is being billed by Cape Town Opera. It thoroughly blurs the styles of opera and musical, and could even serve as a trend setter for future compositions.

The work is based on Jakes Mda's book "Ways of Dying". In his libretto, Michael Williams has provided ample scope for the human drama of the two-edged sword which visits so many people's lives. This aspect of the plot redeems it from being just another PC job.

However, I fail to understand the necessity for casual crudities in the text, in particular the references to bestiality and male genitals. Or was that an unsuccessful attempt at humour?

Williams also directed the work. The cast is well-trained and stagework is comfortable. Imaginative use is made of props to create the interior of a shack, as well as of our beloved taxi-drivers!

The piece is musically eclectic and includes unaccompanied African folk songs, gospel hymn singing, sensitive jazz ballads, raunchy foot-tappers and pounding rhythmic numbers. Soloists and chorus alike seemed at home in all these various styles.

Peter McLea orchestrated Denzil Weale's music. They fused the sounds of pennywhistles, African percussions, and a more-or-less standard jazz band effortlessly. Indeed, it is amazing that the structure of opera and the vitality of a jazz orchestra have not been honed before! It seems a perfectly natural blend.

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Graham Scott conducted the orchestra. One wondered how often the musicians would have preferred to break out of a closely defined score, and done some improvising. But they stayed together well. And the relationship between them and the onstage singers was good.

It took me a while to discern how I should be listening to this work. As an opera, the use of microphones was an anomaly. As a musical, the element of human drama was too intense! The solo voices and chorus (trained by Allan Stephenson) were not united in style, either.

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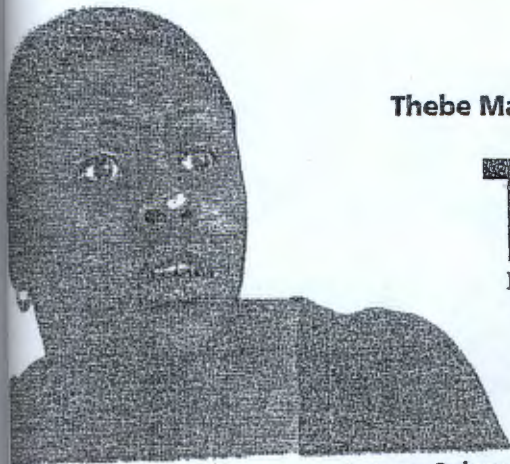
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The work is an interesting experiment in musical styles. Dramatically it is powerful and relevant. The cast is vocally strong. And despite a very wet and cold opening night, the theatre was packed. See it: it is well worth a sitting.

Mda goes to the opera



Thebe Mabanga

The legacy of South Africa's literary icon Zanele Mda, known internationally as Zakes, is about to be further entrenched when his first adult novel *Ways of Dying*

takes to the stage as a musical called *Love and Green Onions*.

The novel has already been successfully dramatised by Lara Foot Newton in a stage version that starred Nomsa Nene and Mncedisi Shabangu, among others. Now the lives of Toloki — an eccentric, professional mourner — and his sultry lover Noria take on a musical proportion as opera composer Michael

Noria: Gloria Bosman in *Love and Green Onions*

Williams expresses Mda's magical realism in sound.

"*Ways of Dying* is a magical, wonderful, surreal look at South African life," says Williams. "I was struck by the intensity with which Mda created a world that is not accessible. The way in which Mda transforms a bleak world also impressed me."

For his 11th major work, Williams has chosen jazz and opera. "I chose jazz because the book sings. I feel jazz is the best vehicle to carry the emotion." But then, as with all adapted novels, parts of the story are left out. All the elements of the book are distilled into the love story between Noria and Toloki.

The role of Noria is played by jazz diva in the making Gloria Bosman, still basking in the mild success of her second album, *The Many Faces of Gloria Bosman*. "Singing jazz in an opera setting has been quite an experience," says Bosman. "I think Noria is representative of a lot of South African girls."

Bosman says Noria's difficulty in negotiating life's upheavals mirrors the experiences of many women trying to make it in a "so-called man's world".

But what fascinates Bosman the most is the opportunity to set the tone of how Noria should be portrayed in an opera. Last year's winner of the Standard Bank Young Artist Award is joined by this year's recipient of the same accolade, baritone Fikile Mvinjelwa.

Mvinjelwa's star will rise even further with his inclusion in this production, which he performs concurrently with an *Evening With Verdi* at the Standard Bank National Arts Festival. His character's love for Noria and fetish for Swiss rolls and green onions inspired the title. Later this year one of the biggest roles for a baritone, Verdi's *Rigoletto*, beckons.

Williams relishes the prospect of returning to the Grahamstown festival and remains confident of its future. "I think we have something to be proud of that we need to support." His mission as a composer: "I want to create South African operas that we can take to the world as an established part of an international repertoire. We must show the world that we do not only have great singers but also great stories to tell."

Williams's repertoire includes works such as *Prophet of God*, *Sacred Bones* and *Buchuland*. He is the managing director of the Cape Town Opera and mentions with pride the work it did with Pauline Malefane, who earlier this year starred in *Carmen* and, following a performance in London, has been offered an opportunity to study with the celebrated soprano Grace Bumbry.

Marcus de Sando as Bhutshaddy completes the cast of the musical. In the pit will be a 13-piece jazz band under the baton of Graham Scott to the music of acclaimed composer Denzil Weale.



Fikile Mvinjelwa en Gloria Bosman in *Love and Green Onions*.

Jazz of nie, eiesoortige opera bly 'n mens by

HERMAN WASSERMAN

GRAHAMSTAD. – 'n Mens kan seker debatteer oor waar die grense lê tussen opera en musiekblyspel, maar *Love and Green Onions*, wat op die hoofees van die Standard Bank Nasionale Kunstefees hier beskryf word as 'n jazzopera, is so 'n unieke brousel dat 'n mens nie ver sal kom met tradisionele konsepte nie.

Daar word heen en weer gekruis tussen opera-arias en resitatief, kwelawysies met baljarende penniefluit en al, kwispelende jazz en tradisionele Afrika-gospelkoorsang.

Die sangers, met die jazzdiva Gloria Bosman (wat 'n stem!) en die operasanger Fikile Mvinjelwa in die hoofrolle, sing met klankversterking, wat soms effens hinderlik is omdat dit 'n blikkerige gevoel gee. (Hulle word begelei deur 'n regte orkes onder leiding van Graham Scott.)

Die libretto, deur Michael Williams wat ook die regisseur is, is gebaseer op Zakes Mda se roman *Ways of Dying*.

Die verhaal handel oor Toloki, 'n professionele roubeklaer, wat by een van die begrafnisse waar hy sy dienste aanbied, hom vasloop in Noria, 'n vrou uit sy kinderjare in 'n tuisdorpje.

Sowel Noria as Toloki is uitgestotenes in die gemeenskap – sy as gevolg van haar opstandigheid oor haar seun se dood aan die hand van

comrades, hy as gevolg van sy eksentrieke, verflenterde boemelaarsbestaan – en die feit dat hy sleg ruik omdat hy lanklaas gebad het!

Die ontmoeting van die twee hoofkarakters gee aanleiding tot die ontvouing van 'n liefdesverhaal, maar een wat ingebed is in 'n gevaarlike omgewing ten tyde van die struggle en die sukkelbestaan in 'n armoedige township.

Die effense sentimentaliteit wat Mda se verhaal aangedoen word in die verwerking vir die verhoog, word vergoed deur die goeie karaktervertolking van Mvinjelwa en Bosman. Mvinjelwa gee aan Toloki 'n baie geslaagde kombinasie van komieklike erns en Bosman se Noria het die diepte wat vereis word om 'n rouende moeder en verwerpe vrou uit te beeld.

Marcus Desando het oulike kamees as die taxibestuurder But'shaddy gelewer.

Wat die sang betref, is Bosman egter los voor. Haar sielvolle jazz-arias is onthutsend mooi en roerend, en haar stem het 'n merkwaardige soepelheid en krag wat sy na behore gebruik.

Mvinjelwa het veral in die tweede helfte van die openingsaand tot sy reg gekom en hom ingeleef in sy arias. Aan die begin van die aand was dit asof hy sy woorde nog effens insluk.

Daar is wel 'n paar probleme in die ensemble-dele. Die kinderkoor

was aan die senuagtige kant aan die begin, met die gevolg dat hul ligte stemme veral aan die begin plekplek verdwyn het.

Ook die volwasse koor het by tye onseker en ongelyk gesing, en die oorgang tussen die solo's en ensemble-sang was soms aan die rowwe kant.

Dit is egter haakplekke wat sekerlik uitgestryk kan word. Tegnies gesproke is daar ook pluspunte soos die fantasieryke stel en die treffende visuele toertjies met rekwisiete – lyke wat aan galgtoue neerdaal, 'n (nagebootste) buiteband wat in vlamme opgaan, 'n taxi uit draad gebou. Veral egter is dit die eiesoortige karakter van die opera wat 'n mens bybly – dis óns wysies, óns ritmes, óns stories wat vertel word.

Dis dalk nie die soort opera wat tradisionele liefhebbers van dié musiekvorm verag nie, ook nie die soort jazz wat toegewydes sou verkies nie, nóg 'n Amerikaanse soort jazzopera soos *Porgy and Bess* of 'n ligte musiekblyspel sonder swaar oomblikke.

Maar wanneer daar in musiek, liriek en spel aan 'n tipies Suid-Afrikaanse storie soos dié van Mda uitging gegee word, is dit juis die oorskryding van grense en tradisionele estetiese norme wat vir die mees boeiende aspekte sorg.

● *Love and Green Onions* word van 19 tot 28 Julie in die Baxter-teater in Kaapstad opgevoer.

OPERA FOR AFRICA

Christopher Ballantine on the premiere of 'Princess Magogo'

As South Africa continues to re-invent itself in the post-apartheid era, the question of what an 'African' opera might be has been on the agenda for some time. It's part of a much larger set of questions: about how to 'think' about opera—and classical music in general—in a context where these traditions are no longer guaranteed their old hegemony; about how to fund such activities, given limited resources and enormous demands for social and economic reconstruction and redress; and—in sharpest irony—about the sheer abundance of singing talent among the country's population, and the rising clamour, from growing numbers of outstanding young black singers, for more resources for career-oriented training in opera. In the last five years, the Durban-based Opera Africa has been at the forefront of initiatives to mount professional productions that showcase how opera might be 'Africanized': with increasing assurance and success, their *Magic Flute*, *Carmen*, *Fidelio* and *Faust* have set these works in local contexts, with largely black casts, in local languages, for black and white audiences.

But the company's thrilling new production—its first commission—makes a quantum leap, marking a signal moment in the history of opera in South Africa. *Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu*, which had its premiere before a rapturous audience at Durban's Playhouse Opera on May 4, is the country's first opera by a black composer. Written for a cast of 13 soloists, large chorus, dancers and full orchestra, it's also the

■ *Princess Magogo*, subject of *Mzilikazi Khumalo's* new opera



first South African opera to have music that is shaped to its core by local traditions, and to have an original libretto written in an indigenous language—Zulu, in this case. (Lest there be any confusion, I'm obviously making a distinction between opera and the country's long and honourable tradition of 'black' musicals, by composers such as Todd Matshikiza, Gibson Kente and Mbongeni Ngema.) The work is based on the life of the justly celebrated Zulu princess Constance Magogo, the 20th century's greatest authority on Zulu music and its most powerful advocate (she was, for example, musical consultant to the makers of the British-made film *Zulu*, released in 1964). An outstanding performer, she was the last accomplished player of the *ugubhu* musical bow, and a singer of extraordinary expressive power and vocal range (about three octaves). Her repertoire

was vast: 'traditional' bow songs, some dating from the 18th century, were at its centre, and she herself composed prolifically in that idiom, often reflecting on some of the great issues in what was a tumultuous era in Zulu history. She was the daughter of King Dinuzulu; her grandfather was King Cetshwayo, and Shaka and Dingane were her great-great-uncles. The pointed connection to the present is that her son is Mangosuthu Buthelezi: a controversial Zulu nationalist, he was head of the kwaZulu 'homeland' administration during the apartheid era and is now a minister in President Thabo Mbeki's cabinet.

The music for this extraordinary opera is by South Africa's most distinguished black choral composer, Mzilikazi Khumalo, who is now 70. By profession a school-teacher and then an academic (eventually a professor of African languages), Khumalo came to musical fame within the vast, modern and richly hybrid music known as *makwaya*—a vernacular repertoire forged from a meeting of indigenous idioms with the Western traditions of oratorio and hymnody. Like much of his other music, Khumalo's writing for the opera is deeply imbued with the five- and six-note scales, and the harmonies and rhythms, of indigenous Zulu music. And because Zulu is a tone language, its speech-tones (high, low or falling and gliding) have a powerful effect on the contours of the sung melodies. Moreover, at crucial moments in the work Khumalo wonderfully weaves in five of the 40-odd Magogo songs that were recorded during her lifetime (the earliest in 1939). Equally meaningful and effective are the unexpected eruptions, within the composed score, of a couple of public-domain ('traditional') Zulu choral songs. For all that, I was at times oddly reminded of Mussorgsky and Janáček.

If Khumalo's music is a marvellous hybrid, so too are the remarkable circumstances of the opera's composing. Because *makwaya* developed in destitute conditions—typically the only available instruments were the choristers' own voices, and a knowledge of staff notation was virtually non-existent—the repertoire is almost entirely a cappella, and notated in tonic sol-fa. This is still the way Khumalo composes. And it is the way he composed his opera. What then of the orchestra? Enter Michael Hankinson—a British-born composer and conductor, and now a prominent figure in the musical life of South Africa, his home since 1970. Khumalo delivered an unaccompanied vocal score, in tonic sol-fa. Hankinson had this rendered into staff notation, then devised all the orchestral music—the accompaniment and the freestanding orchestral passages (interludes and transitional sections in particular). Mindful of the importance of creating an 'African'-sounding score, he spent six months listening intensively to recordings of Magogo's music, and Zulu music in general. Of course, the idea of trying to avoid all idea of a Western aesthetic, whatever that might mean, would have made no sense: since Khumalo's *makwaya*-based score was already a hybrid of Zulu and Western features fused through the processes of colonialism—indeed, the Zulu history told in the opera is inseparable from the story of modernization—the West was already 'there'. Nevertheless, Hankinson endeavoured to mould his orchestral score to Khumalo's choral one, taking his cue from the vocal lines and harmonies, choosing timbres appropriate to the idiom, seeking everywhere to support, reinforce, and enhance. These are integrative goals, and he has succeeded admirably in realizing them.

The libretto is by Themba Msimang, an eminent author and academic who had collaborated with Khumalo in the creation of *uShaka*, a large oratorio for soloists, chorus and orchestra (a CD recording was released by Sony in 1996). Broadly, the opera's context is the defeat of the Zulus by the British. It opens with a prologue—

Magogo on her deathbed—and unfolds in a series of scenic flashbacks as the Princess recalls important historical and personal events just prior to, and during, her own lifetime. In the first act, these include communal celebrations on the return of her father King Dinuzulu from the island of St Helena, where he had been imprisoned during the war with the British; the birth of the Princess and her early illness; her talent for music, and musical training; the King's arrest, despite his attempts to dissuade the rebel Bambatha from leading an anti-colonial uprising; and the King's parting plea to his daughter to strive to unify the Zulu people and to use song to tell Zulu history. The flashbacks in the second act deal with events in Magogo's early womanhood: her Christian beliefs; her close bond with her brother Solomon after the death of their parents; his coronation; the Princess and her lover, whom she agrees to give up for the sake of an arranged marriage that would strengthen Zulu unity; and the agony of the lovers' parting. The epilogue returns to the deathbed scene: Magogo is now visited by the ancestors, who commend her on her achievements, help her to die and lead her away.

Curiously, then, what the opera memorializes—apart from Magogo's death—are facets of only the first 23 years of her life: in fact she lived to the age of 84. But that short span is sufficient for the opera to make its fundamental ideological points, all of them matters of agitation and debate in recent South African history. Simplifying only a little, I take these to be, above all, ethnic Zulu nationalism and the struggle against colonial rule. (King Dinuzulu's dispute with the rebellious Bambatha mimics some of the disagreements, in apartheid's final decades, between Mangosuthu Buthelezi's Zulu-nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party and the African National Congress.) Also vividly in the frame are patriotism, cultural heritage, peace, reconciliation, and the widely supported goal of an 'African renaissance'.

The richly textured music, frequently cyclical in the African manner, is noble, stately, often deeply moving. The two acts have different emphases. In the first, the focus is primarily on the public and the courtly; its music has a powerful grandeur. The second is strongly weighted towards the personal and the private; here the music is less ceremonial, and offers an abundance of moments of captivating intimacy. Many wonderful scenes—more than can be mentioned here—linger in the memory: a moving duet, with chorus, for the young princess and her mother when the British arrest the king; a church scene which has the princess singing a hymnic aria against warm, organ-like harmonies played by the brass; a lovers' meeting between the princess and her young suitor; and her lament, after she has given up her lover for the sake of Zulu unity.

Such moments are likely to move audiences anywhere—not least because the immensely expressive qualities of Khumalo's score owe so much both to the contours and gestures of *makwaya*, and to the original songs of Magogo. (At one climactic moment the orchestra cedes wholly to the *ugubhu*, and the princess sings one of Magogo's own compositions with only the bow for accompaniment.) The orchestration is earthy, brassy, percussive; it favours deep pitches and dark, grainy hues—qualities in keeping with the timbre of the *ugubhu* and the natural qualities of the setting (reed, hide, wood, feather, earth). Never superfluous, the orchestra adds colour and texture, meaningfully changing these to emphasize structure and enhance tension; its energetic counterpoints deepen dramatic meaning, darken the sense of portent.

The beautiful, brilliantly effective design is by Andrew Verster, one of the country's leading artists. Zulu and other motifs gleam in burnished colours against the rear

darkness; and the exquisitely stylised traditional costumery, emblazoned with colourful head plumes, is simply radiant in this finely-lit production.

Yet there is one distressing problem. Dramatically, the piece is too static, its action often frozen in a series of stilted tableaux. Given the strength and vibrancy of local black dramatic traditions, this comes as a surprise. But the difficulty commences with a work that has been structured as ceremony, spectacle, dance and song, in a sequence of musical 'numbers'. (Nor does the occasional punctuation by a 'traditional' item—Zulu warrior dancing, for example—afford any help.) There are notable exceptions: as when separate choirs representing opposing clans enter from opposite sides of the stage, stunningly costumed.

Each sings its own choral dance-song, their simultaneity resulting in an opulent cacophony of happy collisions, and a visual feast of movement that celebrates unity in difference. Themí Venturas's stage direction handles the large cast with a sense of organization and tidiness that certainly shows the stage finery to best advantage, but I did wonder if a producer more deeply inured to black theatre might not have been able to unlock a more compelling sense of drama. His direction seems inhibited by the inherent stasis of the score, reinforcing rather than playing against it.

Moreover, the spoken dialogue (in English) further undermines dramatic tension by repeatedly disrupting the musical flow. But a caution is needed here. One has to ponder whether the scarcity of dynamic movement—the music drama so struggled for in Western opera—is a shortcoming, or is instead an indication of a contrary aesthetic. I suspect it's the former: the result of a dependence on an idiom (*makwaya*) honed in other contexts, to quite different ends. It has to be said, though, that the problem was only exacerbated by Gerhard Geist's musical direction, which tended to 'iron out' the score's dramatic tensions

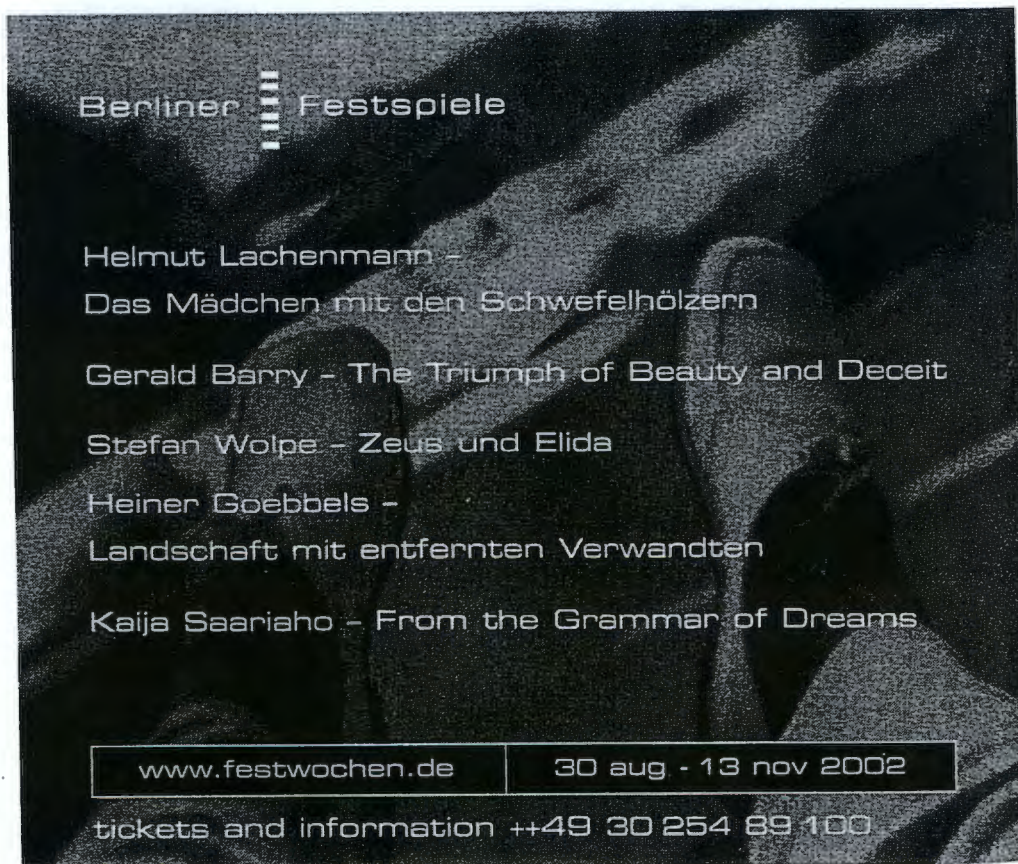
■ *Sibongile Khumalo in the title role of 'Princess Magogo' in Durban*



by riding roughshod over the niceties of tempo indication, and by allowing tempos to drag.

In the title role, Sibongile Khumalo (no relation to the composer) is simply breathtaking. I anticipated nothing less: Khumalo is South Africa's leading diva, and she is now performing better than ever. Here is a singer of extraordinary power, balance, and purity of tone, the voice bearing a charismatic presence, projected with unfailingly musical and dramatic intelligence, and seemingly without expressive limit. We surely have to regard her as one of the great mezzo-sopranos of our time. Fikile Mvinjelwa—a majestic, resonant baritone—was impressive as King Dinuzulu; the soprano Linda Bukhosini played the queen with a touching vulnerability, conveying her emotional lines with passionate intensity and acting with poise and intelligence. Among the remaining principals, Bongani Tembe was disappointing in the role of Magogo's brother: his lyric tenor voice is true, but too small to hold its own in this company. There is a ravishing women's trio—in which Joyce Moholoagae's luminous soprano shines with promise of a great future—and the chorus (the Durban Serenade Choral Society) never inspires anything less than wonder. The KwaZulu-Natal Philharmonic Orchestra gave strong support.

Even before it opened, *Magogo* had already aroused considerable international interest. The first night was broadcast live by radio networks in the US and Europe; in March the production goes to Chicago. The piece certainly deserves such close attention: its dramatic weaknesses notwithstanding, *Magogo* overflows with music of great beauty, freshness and originality. What's more, it provokes and inspires. If, as so many in Africa hope, the 21st is to be the 'African century', this opera is likely to be looked back upon as an important early herald.



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The Zulu language opera, "Princess Magogo," performed Friday at the Ravinia Festival.

OPERA REVIEW

Cast delights despite 'Magogo's' shortcomings

By Michael Cameron
Special to the Tribune

Western composers with a cosmopolitan bent have borrowed from other cultures for centuries. True hybrids, with two idioms combined in a more or less equal way, are a more recent phenomena and have a less impressive track record.

In recent years the Ravinia festival has occasionally embraced such multicultural and multimedia events, so it was fitting that the festival included in its 100th birthday celebration Friday night the North American premiere of the first opera written in the Zulu language, "Princess Magogo," courtesy of African Renaissance Opera Productions and the Chicago Sinfonietta under Michael Hankinson.

One might anticipate that a marriage of opera and traditional Zulu music would prove more problematic than the fruitful fusions of African music with American pop and jazz. Indeed, this production included a fair share of miscalculations. There were some minor production snafus, including an amplification system that worked well for the soloists, less so for the choruses and apparently not at all for the orchestra, which was barely audible in the pavilion when accompanying multiple voices.

More serious were some shortcomings from composer Mzilikazi Khumalo and arranger Hankinson. The orchestration had an inexplicable Gallic tinge, at times calling to mind the French trained American Aaron Copland in his more pastoral moods.

When fused with traditional Zulu themes, the combination was sometimes an uncomfortable

fit, even though Themba Msimang provided a libretto based on the life of Magogo that was rich in possibilities. In addition, it became apparent as the evening progressed that the musical substance, despite its considerable allure, was not quite sufficient to sustain a nearly three-hour musical drama.

Yet its strengths are so profound, even overwhelming, that the work must still be considered a rousing triumph.

Most opera or dance companies would be hard pressed to assemble such a gifted cast as the one that graced the Ravinia stage. Mezzo soprano Sibongile Khumalo as the princess was a marvel. Her extraordinary range and expressive gliding inflections between notes of traditional tunes was employed to moving effect in the opening scene of the second act as she laments the fate of her people at the hands of the British colonialists.

In scenes incorporating heavy doses of European influences (particularly in the orchestration), the recycling of themes wears thin by the second act. Those scenes that closely mirror traditional Zulu music, singing and dance depend on reiteration at least as much, but are far more entrancing.

Herein lies a central dilemma of the concept. Much African music relies on linear repetition, whereas Western art music generally depends on long-term structural plans and development. When the opera minimizes its roots, the limited material eventually loses some of its dramatic effect.

In the Reunion Feast, however, the pit orchestra rests during a breathtaking series of processions, choruses and dances. This high-octane celebration features long stretches of dancing (courtesy of choreographer Bongani Zulu), on-stage traditional instruments and choral passages. Percussionists Sithembiso Zungu and Khayelihle Ntini here and in many other scenes provided thrilling virtuoso turns.

Kudos to Ravinia for taking a chance on this exhilarating spectacle, and let's hope that this signals only the beginning for a genre with limitless potential.

S. African opera is promising start to Ravinia's 100th

BY WYNE DELACOMA

If the term "music festival" implies equal parts music and festivity, the Ravinia Festival launched its 2004 season in a state of near-perfect equilibrium Friday night.

The American premiere of a Zulu-language opera, "Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu," isn't exactly what one might expect from opening night of a 100-year-old festival that has been the summer home of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra since 1936. But Ravinia hasn't survived to celebrate its centennial season by clinging to old formulas. Experiments with extravagant pieces of musical theater, from Stephen Sondheim's "Sweeney Todd" to oratorios by Osvaldo Golijov and John Adams, have kept the cobwebs at bay in recent seasons. "Princess Magogo," with its excellent operatic voices, ferocious tribal dancing and melodic lines that somehow combined uncomplicated folk music and the dark-hued contours of Russian opera, was a promising kickoff to an ambitious centennial season.

The opera, which had its premiere in 2002 in Durban, South Africa, tells the true story of Princess Magogo, a revered singer, composer and historian of traditional Zulu music, who was born in 1900 and died in 1984. Her father was King Dinuzulu, and she lived during a time of turmoil in South Africa, when Zulu rebellion against the British was crushed. Composer Mzilikazi Khu-

folk tune, the melodies in "Princess Magogo" mesmerized the ear.

Mezzo-soprano Sibongile Khumalo (no relation to the composer) was compelling as Princess Magogo, managing to give life and feeling to a character completely unfamiliar to American audiences. Her singing voice was powerful and warm, with a conversational flexibility. In the stretches of spoken dialog, she was both earthy and regal. The scene in a Christian church, as she prayed for guidance, was particularly touching.

The principal female singers often sounded pinched in their upper registers, but the male principals sang with stunning amplitude and depth. The King Dinuzulu of Fikile Mvinjelwa was powerful, and Peter Mcebisi brought a sumptuous ebony tone to the roles of Ndwandwe, Princess Magogo's beloved, and the rebel leader Bambatha. Thema Mkhwani was a vivid presence as the king's counselor.

The production, under the artistic direction of Themi Venturas, was austere but effective. English super-titles shared a backdrop screen filled with black-and-white line drawings of African masks and landscapes. The king sat on an airy, gold-painted wooden chair, and in the church scene, a handful of isolated women were scattered among hardened wooden pews.

Dance scenes choreographed by Bongani Zulu were among the high points. Driven by the relentless hard, dry twack of wooden sticks on



Sibongile Khumalo (left) and Peter Mcebisi star in "Princess Magogo."

a leather-covered drum, the dancers kicked with enough force to flatten their own noses. Hurling themselves into the air, slamming their feet onto the stage floor, they were a fearful, exciting, bellicose force.

Michael Hankinson, who orchestrated the opera, conducted the Chi-

MUSIC

From the Zulu nation to the heart of Chicago

The Ravinia festival is entering its 100th year by premiering a work that combines jazz, opera and world music, says Jeremy Grant

Ravinia, North America's oldest outdoor music festival, is embracing old age with flair. This week marks the start of its 100th year in business and its programme acknowledges some of this year's other artistic milestones, including the half-century since the death of Charles Ives and the century since the birth of George Balanchine and the death of Antonin Dvořák.

But there is also the latest stage in Ravinia's efforts to attract new audiences: the American premiere of a South African opera based on the life of Zulu princess Magogo kaDinzulu. (Yet another anniversary here: the decade since the end of apartheid and the birth of South African democratic government.)

Last year festival president Welz Kauffman broke new ground with an unusual experiment. He convinced the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, resident at Ravinia throughout the summer, to perform Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* in an arrangement for strings and, improbably, salsa band. What could have been a clumsy attempt at "crossover" turned out better than even Kauffman expected. Now, with *Princess Magogo*, Ravinia is experimenting again, blending opera, jazz and world music as a way of "bridging what we feel are artificial boundaries between musical genres", says festival chairman Eden Martin.

The piece, billed as South Africa's first opera, interweaves flashbacks from the life of Magogo, a champion of Zulu music and - yes, really - the mother of South Africa's former home affairs minister and Zulu chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi.

Politics and music blend in the genesis of the opera's music as well. Mzilikazi Khumalo, *Magogo's* composer, is head of the department of African language and linguistics at the University of Witwatersrand.

Music, he explains, was off the curriculum for black school children in apartheid-era South Africa. Zulu music was hounded into obscurity by a political system that considered it pagan.

Zulu music was hounded into obscurity by a political system that declared it pagan

Khumalo took a job as a teacher, yet managed to pick up the basics of western harmony and counterpoint privately. *Magogo*, however, is not written in western notation. Instead, Khumalo has noted his music down in tonic sol-fa, with others transcribing it into a score that can be read by western classical musicians. So how does it sound? The music is close to the natural inflections of the Zulu language, which uses three tones to help denote meaning. Complex cross-rhythms complete the picture.

For a festival that began in 1904 as an amusement park to attract customers to the fledgling Chicago & Milwaukee Electric Railroad, the staging of an opera from South Africa is another sign of this festival's global flavour - and its ability to attract UBS, the bank, as lead sponsor.

Yet only about 10 per cent of its patrons are from outside Chicago and the counties to the north of America's second largest city. Kauffman says that the festival is better known in Europe even than on the east coast of the US, and that he's working on changing that. But, like its programming, this takes nothing away from Ravinia's appeal.

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MUSIC

Sibongile Khumalo as the title character in the Zulu opera "Princess Magogo KaDinuzulu," which will be performed next weekend at the Ravinia Festival in Illinois.

An Aria for Post-Apartheid Africa

At Last, Opera Learns to Speak Your Language (if You Speak Zulu)

By ANNE MIDGETTE

OPERA as historical pageant? Sure. Opera as a collaboration of a country's leading artists? Of course. But opera in Zulu?

"It's a language that's very singable," said Sandra de Villiers, who founded Opera Africa in Durban, South Africa, in 1995. "There are a few clicks in it, but it has the same open vowels that Italian has."

Ms. de Villiers and her company commissioned what they say is the first Zulu opera, "Princess Magogo KaDinuzulu," and gave its premiere in Durban in 2002. On Friday, they open the 100th-anniversary season of the Ravinia Festival in Highland Park, Ill., near Chicago, and symbolism will abound.

This is also the 10th anniversary of democracy in post-apartheid South Africa, an appropriate occasion to revive the opera, which aims at a happy fusion of the country's black and white traditions. Princess Magogo, who died in 1984, was a composer, a traditional praise singer, an authority on Zulu music and a political activist. The work is based on songs she performed on the ugubu, or Zulu bow, a kind of string instrument. Each tribe has its own bow variant.)

Mzilikazi Khumalo, a professor of linguistics turned composer, drew his music not only from those songs but also from Zulu musical traditions and speech patterns. Michael Hankinson, a British-born conductor and orchestra manager, then harmonized and scored it for a Western orchestra.

"I felt that we have to try to see whether there is a possibility that a new African opera genre can start,"

said Ms. de Villiers, who has also presented a Zulu production of Mozart's "Magic Flute."

But there is more. Princess Magogo's son Mongosuthu Buthelezi is the president of the Inkatha Freedom Party, the longstanding rival of the majority African National Congress. The 1994 democratic elections now being commemorated so warmly were accompanied by tremendous unrest, with the Inkatha Freedom Party and the African National Congress as the major opposing factions.

Nevertheless, the opera, like its heroine, is not a subject of controversy. "She herself was never politicized," Ms. de Villiers said of the princess. "She is royalty, of the direct line of Shaka, sister of King Solomon. Therefore, she is revered by all."

So the opera may instead be seen as a symbol of reconciliation. Dr. Buthelezi, after all, has served as minister of home affairs in the South African government since 1994. His sometimes complicated relationship with Nelson Mandela and other African National Congress politicians has improved. Mr. Mandela attended the premiere of "Princess Magogo" and professed to admire the piece. And Obed Mlaba, the mayor of Durban and a member of the African National Congress, is accompanying the troupe to Chicago.

Durban and Chicago, it happens, are sister cities. The Chicago radio station WFMT produced the broadcast of the opera's premiere. So there is another message of partnership.

"One of my trustees said, 'This is a change-agent possibility,'" said Weiz Kauffman, the president of Ravinia. "I use that term not even fully knowing what it means. But Chicago looks at us differently when we do

something like this.

"I just want the biggest possible audience. I do want people to come hear Brahms or Bruckner played by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. I am convinced that any way we can get their foot on the lawn, so to speak, the more we will galvanize interest. If you're doing 'Princess Magogo,' people will look at your brochure."

It's a lot of freight for one little opera to carry. But the most seemingly incongruous part of the project, creating a fusion of European-style opera singing and Zulu praise song, turns out to be one of the most natural. Under apartheid, opera in South Africa was an elitist, whites-only entertainment. But once the restrictions were lifted, the Zulus, who also have a deep-rooted musical tradition, began pursuing their own interest in Western opera.

"I was astounded by the amount of natural operatic talent," said Ms. de Villiers, who studied in Salzburg, Austria, before returning to South Africa. She described working with a young baritone who had no operatic experience.

"After two months of training, he could do the Count's aria from 'The Marriage of Figaro,'" she said. "He actually won a competition."

And she rhapsodized about Nonhlanhla Mthimkhulu, 20, who sings the role of Queen Salomo, one of King Dinuzulu's wives, at Ravinia. "I took such a chance with her," Ms. de Villiers said, "but she is so, so good."

Ms. de Villiers is not alone in her estimation of local talent and interest. Opera is undergoing a new flowering in South Africa. In 2002, the University of Natal (now the University of KwaZulu-Natal) opened an opera school

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At Last, Opera Learns to Sing in Zulu

Continued From Page 23

and vocal academy. One of its teachers, Christopher Ballantine, told Andante.com that KwaZulu singers would be the great operatic voices of the future.

"Africa and Wales have the finest singers," Mr. Hankinson, the conductor, said. "Both have a tradition of singing with action. South Africa is probably the most musical country in the world. Singing is a natural form of expression. Everything in an African village involves music and dance. Opera is their daily life."

The Zulu tradition of choral music is particularly strong, as Americans learned when Paul Simon worked with the a cappella group Ladysmith Black Mambazo on his "Graceland" album in 1986. That group, also from the province of KwaZulu-Natal (Ladysmith is the founder's hometown), is coming to Ravinia on June 15 and 16.

Certainly, Sibongile Khumalo (no relation to the opera's composer), who sings the role of Princess Magogo, embodies talent and versatility. Her impressive voice spans a huge range, crossing unaffectedly from one style to another. She has sung Carmen and the mezzo-soprano solos in the Verdi Requiem.

South Africa is presenting Ms. Khumalo as a symbol of its new culture. She recently toured Europe in a production of Mzilikazi Khumalo's 1996 oratorio "UShaka, KaSenzangakhona," based on the life of a Zulu warrior king and presented as part of South Africa's own celebration of its 10th year of democracy. It was seeing this oratorio that gave Ms. de Villiers the idea for "Princess

The Zulu choral tradition is strong, as Paul Simon taught Americans.

Magogo."

Ms. Khumalo is the only member of the original "Princess Magogo" cast who will appear at Ravinia. The opera has its own history of unrest. Scheduled to be presented as part of the Chicago Festival of the Humanities in March 2003, the production was blocked by members of the cast, who sued the company. The bad blood, Ms. de Villiers said, was a byproduct of the tremendous international interest in the opera's first performances.

"It was just too big a success for too small a company," she said. "Nobody could believe there wasn't financial gain." The cast members, thinking they were being exploited, threatened to walk out before opening night in Durban. They ultimately came to an agreement that, they claimed, included the right of first refusal for all future productions of the opera — and they subsequently invoked that right, preventing the 2003 Chicago performance.

"Lucky for us, the authors stood by Opera Africa," Ms. de Villiers said.

Mr. Khumalo, Mr. Hankinson, Themba Msimang, the work's librettist, and other creators reclaimed the performance rights, and are allowing the work to be produced at Ravinia and elsewhere.

All the history, politics and pageantry, onstage and off, tend to obscure the issue of whether "Princess Magogo" is a successful opera. At the least, it represents a serious attempt at a new kind of classical crossover.

"I was trying to create a new genre, a new sound, where the orchestra is playing African music," Mr. Hankinson said. "African music is highly rhythmic and essentially melodic, more modal than tonal. Professor Khumalo basically wrote melodies I tried to find harmonies based on them that would enhance the meanings of the text."

Whether or not this proves to be an opera for the ages, it has a certain poetic justice for Sibongile Khumalo, who, as a child, sat at the feet of Princess Magogo and heard her sing before struggling to get training as a classical singer in a segregated society. Last year, Ms. Khumalo described to an interviewer from the Neue Zürcher Zeitung in Switzerland her delight at seeing how much of the Durban audience for "Princess Magogo" was black. "Opera can be African, too," she said.



Joseph Shabalala and other members of Ladysmith Black Mambazo will be at Ravinia next month.

Jack Vartoogian

Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu – Playhouse Theatre, Durban 4 May, 2002

Durban, South Africa. Think Blackpool in the tropics. A kiss-me-quick sea front of tourist hotels and fast food joints, with mile upon mile of glorious, golden, sandy beaches, the Indian Ocean lapping at its feet. Tourist Durban is South Africa's hidden local holiday destination (its airport no longer services international flights). But this city of sprawling orbital townships is also the third city of the new South Africa. It is also its most racially mixed: Zulu, Afrikaner, Indian, and run-of-the-mill white South African all rub shoulders in this cultural melting pot. It is also the most sybaritic of the country's cities: locals and visitors alike are dedicated sun worshippers.

There is also a most unusual cultural phenomenon based here which is about to erupt onto the international scene: Opera Africa. Whether a small opera company in a small southern hemisphere city has the right to take to itself the name of an entire continent is a fair question. Now consider the company's mission: "to place opera within an African context to promote culture as an essential instrument for the development, maintenance and growth in civil society". This is clearly a company with a global view of the power of the arts in general, and opera in particular. More power to its elbow: take note all bloated, fat-cat western houses.

The power house behind this phenomenon is the workaholic, ex-singing human dynamo, Sandra de Villiers. Afrikaner in origin, she left South Africa to study singing in Vienna. Realising that nature had not endowed her with a world class voice, she decided to channel her energies into teaching at the Technikon Natal where she founded and headed the opera school. Post apartheid, with funds in very short supply and increasingly few opportunities for her pupils to use the skills she was teaching, her response was typically straightforward yet original: in 1995 she set up Opera Africa to create those very opportunities she saw were lacking. And not only in Durban: this was to be a touring company which could spread the word nationwide.

Opera Africa set out to perform operas with a universal message to reach the parts nobody else was reaching: *The Magic Flute*, *Carmen*, *Fidelio* and even *Faust*. The latter was performed in a sold-out 5,000 seat theatre at the University of Zululand and subsequently to great acclaim under the stars in rural Zululand.

With such a history, the natural way forward was to commission a new opera. This process has brought the most hardened opera administrators to the verge of, and sometimes beyond tears. De Villiers launched herself into this project with characteristic passion. Given her background, and her work in the Zulu homeland, it was only natural that she should look for a powerfully resonant local subject. History was kind to her. Princess Magogo was a real person. Indeed she was the mother of Mangosuthu Buthelezi, himself a controversial and seminal figure in recent South African politics. She was also a distinguished singer, musician, composer and performer of traditional Zulu song.

De Villiers immediately realised that this project could bring together people of many different backgrounds while reinforcing her belief that Opera Africa be a unifying force

in the country. Around her, she has assembled a formidable team. Most of her board is of Zulu origin, and those who are not are significant forces in the artistic life of South Africa. Composer, Mzilikazi Khumalo, and librettist, Themba Msimang, have teamed up with orchestrator, Mike Hankinson, designer, Andrew Verster, and director, Thembi Venturas. Sibongile Khumalo, who performs the role of the Princess herself has also been heavily involved.

The story of the music itself is fascinating. Mention above of an orchestrator might well have sent opera buffs into the stratosphere, but orchestrators have long been an accepted part of the Broadway scene. Composers as eminent as Richard Rodgers, Irving Berlin and Stephen Sondheim often left the task of orchestrating to trusted collaborators, while they got on with the serious business of composing. Khumalo's haunting melodies, borne of his Zulu ancestry, combined with Mike Hankinson's "western" orchestrations, makes for a unique and memorable experience.

The opera opens with the Princess on her deathbed. The ancients have come to collect and take her to the next life. A gently rocking marimba accompanies their percussive vocal incantations. "Uzzhh, uzzhh" they intone as her dead father approaches to encourage her. But, no. Like de Villiers herself, the Princess stands up to the very forces of nature and persuades them that her time is not yet nigh. There is work still to be done in this life to unite her beloved nation. A contemporary political message, while never laboured, is never far below the surface.

This simple, gentle yet hypnotic deathbed scene belies and gives way to the extraordinary vibrancy of Andrew Verster's designs. Here is the real star of the show – his ability to absorb and distil the essence of Zulu art and culture while re-interpreting it for a contemporary local and international audience is truly powerful. A riot of colour suddenly invades the stage and we know we are in for a treat. All the more so when you are taken, as I was privileged to be, by Verster himself on a tour of the Indian commercial district where he sourced most of the fabrics for the costumes and the eminently portable set. Through the narrow lanes and passageways of the foursquare, utilitarian 70s blocks, we entered haberdashery heaven and a world long since lost to we pre-packaged westerners. Everything was available by the metre and at a rate rendered meaninglessly and embarrassingly cheap by the tragedy of the exchange rate. The total cost for some 150 costumes was 5,000 US dollars. That would barely cover the backside of one of our larger Western operatic specimens.

Khumalo's melodies, as all Zulu music, is modal, yet at times it tantalisingly also explores the wilder reaches of tonality. Akin to all the great folk traditions, it is somehow unique to its time and place. Combined with Hankinson's orchestrations, lovers of, for example, Janacek will not feel alienated. But there is more: Hankinson's skill allied to Khumalo's genius, come together at the end of Act 1 in an extraordinary pastiche, yet in a wholly Zulu context, of a great Verdi finale.

For a total novice in things Zulu this piece is a revelation. For starters, my jaw dropped when I discovered that to learn not only this opera, but *Carmen*, *Fidelio*, *Faust* and *Flute*,

all the chorus music had to be translated into tonic sol-fa. Doh a wildebeest indeed. Apparently the missionaries, faced with a lack of a written system (being incapable of dealing with the complex oral traditions of most African societies), taught the “natives” throughout the continent to sing hymns using the sol-fa system. The system persists to this day, and not only for choruses. The composer himself writes his melodies, not in western musical notation, but in the sol-fa system. The composition process involved the translation of those melodies into notation before the orchestrator could tackle it. It seems that musical time has stood still while simultaneously moving forward into a brave new world.

A uniformly committed cast, headed by Sibongile Khumalo, brought this work to life with great passion and commitment. There was unevenness in the quality of the voices, but the overall effect was extremely powerful. The first night attracted a wonderful mix of the cream of Durban society, many Durbanites who were coming to their first opera and a host of local and national politicians, who were falling over themselves at the reception afterwards to pledge support, as they each struggled to find superlatives greater than the previous speaker. The final speaker, Mangosuthu Buthelezi himself, had the most powerful message to impart and one which we must hope holds true for South Africa as it struggles to come to terms with its own brave new world: “a renaissance of arts and culture often precedes an economic renaissance and I hope we will look back to this magical evening and recollect this event as a turning point which gave to all of us a greater sense of self-confidence which placed our country on a sounder and faster course towards social stability and economic prosperity.”

Magogo has already captivated Durban’s sister city, Chicago, where it was broadcast live on public radio. Plans are well afoot to present its American premiere there in March 2003. With a world tour in the pipeline, this is clearly a company with major ambitions.



Sibongile Khumalo sings the title role in "Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu," with Given Mabena as her brother, at the Ravinia Festival.

OPERA REVIEW

Varied Cultures Entwine Around a Zulu Princess

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI

HIGHLAND PARK, Ill., June 6 — To pave the way for the United States premiere of a South African Zulu opera this weekend, singers and musicians from the 60-member African Renaissance Opera troupe ventured into schools, parks and community centers in the Chicago area to present performances and workshops. The effort succeeded, judging by the excellent turnout and enormous ovation for the exuberant performance of the opera, "Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu," on Saturday night.

And as the Ravinia Festival opened its centennial season here this weekend, it must have been especially gratifying for its administrators to see many more blacks than usual, both within Ravinia's 3,200-seat performance pavilion and outside on the grounds on a balmy night.

"Princess Magogo," with music by Mzikazi Khumalo and a libretto by Themba Msimang, received its premiere two years ago in Durban, South Africa. It was hailed (and billed at Ravinia) as "the first South African Zulu opera," meaning the first opera to try to combine Western and Zulu musical idioms. But for all the beguiling and powerful qualities of the work, I found the blending of Western and African styles problematic.

To their credit the gifted creators have found a dramatically effective way to tell a complex story. The opera is based on the life of Princess Magogo (1900-1984), daughter of King Dinuzulu, the leader of the Zulus in South Africa.

Magogo, a natural-born singer, has been charged by her father with cultivating and passing on the heritage of Zulu song and culture. The story is told in flashbacks. We first see the princess as an ailing old woman on her deathbed who recounts and re-enacts events of her life: the return of her father from a 10-year exile imposed by the British adversaries; her own birth; the rebellion of the warrior Bambatha, who is caught and beheaded by British troops, the fatal imprisonment of her father, the coronation of her brother, King Solomon, the love affair she was compelled to give up out of duty to



Fikile Mvinjelwa is King Dinuzulu in the opera, composed by Mzikazi Khumalo.

her country

In a preperformance talk, Mr. Khumalo showed how spoken Zulu is almost like music, with pitched tones, flowing contours and sudden gliding effect, qualities he tries to capture in the vocal lines he writes. But Zulu vocal music is not written in traditional Western notation, so Mr. Khumalo's music was transcribed by Western musicians, then orchestrated and arranged by Michael Hankinson, a British-born conductor, who led this performance with the Chicago Sinfonietta.

Mr. Hankinson essentially harmonized Mr. Khumalo's vocal lines, rightly discerning that the melodic notes tend to outline modal harmonies. But by making these implicit harmonies explicit, and by supporting the plaintive vocal lines with lush and warm sustained orchestra chords, Mr. Hankinson sweetened music that should sound tart. At times you thought that you had stumbled into Rimsky-Korsakov's lost African opera.

When the brass resounded, the cymbals crashed, the timpani rolled, and the violins crested, the music could have been a film

score for a Zulu epic, an effect that was enhanced by the use of body microphones to amplify the voices of the singers (probably necessary in the large pavilion).

Whenever the orchestra dropped out, or stayed modestly in the background (playing some undulant riffs or discreet counter-melodies), the music became much more affecting, especially as sung with such riveting authenticity by the impressive African cast. It was headed by Sibongile Khumalo (no relation to the composer), a large-framed mezzo-soprano with a wide-ranging voice, who gave a charismatic yet vulnerable portrayal of the title role. In one scene she sang a forlorn love ode accompanying herself only with some twanging plucks and repeated notes on the *ugubhu*, a single-string Zulu instrument, as disarming an aria as I've heard in some time.

The showstopping moments came when the male dancers took the stage, accompanied only by the dizzying rhythms of a single virtuosic drummer, while the chorus sang chantlike melodies in pungent parallel intervals. During one dance the chorus was joined by a roster of musicians playing long tubelike metal horns that created a wailing din of raw harmony. It was hard not to think, "Now this sounds like the first Zulu opera." And what dancers! Some were as lean as Olympic gymnasts, others were pretty husky; a couple carried not insubstantial guts. Yet they all bounded about the stage with fearless abandon.

Other memorable cast members included Fikile Mvinjelwa as King Dinuzulu, Nonhlanhla Mthimkhulu as Queen Silomo (Magogo's mother) and Given Mabena as Solomon (Magogo's brother). The simple production, played against a backdrop screen with projected African images, including text translations, featured riotously colorful Zulu costumes.

Much great art has come from creators who found common ground between disparate national traditions. Still, I will not soon forget how moving it was to hear Mr. Khumalo during the preperformance talk singing melodies from his opera in his weathered voice. He doesn't have to add palatable Western-style orchestral harmonies to his music to call a score an opera.

RAVINIA CENTENNIAL



Ravinia photo by Ruphin Coudyzer

Sibongile Khumalo in "Princess Magogo," the first South African Zulu opera, playing at Ravinia Friday through Sunday.

Zulu opera makes U.S. premiere

By John von Rhein

Tribune music critic

If there's a moral lurking within the colorful pageantry, stirring music, hypnotic singing and joyous dancing of "Princess Magogo," it's that art can illuminate the soul of a people more eloquently than any other medium.

Next weekend this landmark opera, based on the life of the eponymous Zulu singer who played a seminal role in the ongoing African cultural renaissance, travels from South Africa to Ravinia for its much-anticipated U.S. premiere.

The three performances Friday through Sunday at the Ravinia Festival in Highland Park mark not only the opening of the festival's 100th anniversary season but also the 10th anniversary of democracy in a nation struggling to come to terms with its colonial past and post-apartheid present.

Billed as the first South African Zulu opera, "Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu" scored a major success at its May 2002 world premiere in Chicago's sister city of Durban. The performance by the Dur-

MORE INSIDE

A list of events surrounding the American premiere of "Princess Magogo," and a look back at Ravinia's 100-year history. **PAGE 13**

ban-based Opera Africa was broadcast live throughout the U.S. and around the world through the facilities of Chicago fine arts station WFMT-FM 98.7.

The work had additional performances in Pretoria and had been scheduled to be mounted in Chicago in March 2003 under the auspices of the Chicago Humanities Festival. But the humanities festival did not wish to get caught in an intramural dispute between South African cast members and the Opera Africa management, so it canceled the three announced performances.

That's when Ravinia President and CEO Welz

PLEASE SEE RAVINIA, PAGE 13

RAVINIA: Opera is deeply moving

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Kauffman picked up the project. Having presented such big multicultural events as Osvaldo Golijov's "La Pasión Segun San Marcos" and John Adams' "El Niño" at the festival in 2002 and 2003, respectively, he saw "Princess Magogo" as an opportunity to open Ravinia's gates to an even more ethnically and culturally diverse public.

"It's a piece that's emblematic of everything we're trying to do at Ravinia these days in terms of community outreach and education, even as it reminds people of Ravinia's heritage as an opera presenter," Kauffman says. Ravinia has imported a South African cast of 61 singers, chorus and dancers headed by the country's leading diva, the charismatic mezzo-soprano Sibongile Khumalo, in the title role. They will be accompanied by the Chicago Sinfonietta under Michael Hankinson, the South African composer and conductor who wrote the accompaniments and free-standing orchestral passages for "Princess Magogo."

The opera is being produced by African Renaissance Opera Productions, a troupe representing composer Mzilikasi Khumalo and librettist Themba Msimang, both of whom will be attending the American premiere.

"Princess Magogo" (pronounced "muh-GO-go") is the first African opera with music shaped by local traditions, and also the first to have a libretto written in an indigenous language — Zulu. While the destruction and rebirth of the Zulu nation forms a portion of the text, most of the opera focuses on the life of Princess Magogo up through age 23.

Constance Magogo kaDinuzulu was born to the Zulu royal family in 1900 and died in 1984. She was one of her country's most highly regarded musicians and teachers, a leading authority on Zulu music and a gifted singer whose voice, spanning three octaves, moved listeners from laughter to tears — and toward a greater understanding of themselves as a people.



"Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu" is the first African opera with a libretto written in an indigenous language — Zulu.

Symbol of Zulu nationalism

The power of her songs and poetry made her a potent symbol of and spokeswoman for Zulu nationalism. She composed and recorded more than 40 of her own songs and was the first female *imbongi* — one who literally sings the people's praises and denounces their enemies. She awakened a profound sense of ethnic and cultural identity in her countrymen during a turbulent period in their history.

And that is why this remarkable woman lives in the memory of so many in South Africa (where Zulus make up roughly 20 percent of the country's 40 million inhabitants), say the creators of "Princess Magogo."

"She became the custodian of her people's heritage at a time when the British tried to quash the Zulu monarchy," explains Msimang, who will portray a praise singer in the Ravinia production. "She was very alive to the fact that she had to save the Zulu nation, which is what drew her to Zulu culture. She offered her people hope that she could turn oppression around."

Even though Princess Magogo didn't live to see South Africa become a free nation, she scored a posthumous victory of sorts, according to Msimang. Her son, the controversial Zulu nationalist Mangosuthu Buthelezi, is now home affairs minister in President Thabo Mbeki's cabinet.

"She was an amazing woman in her knowledge of our traditional music," says the composer (who is no relation to the singer Sibongile Khumalo). "I met her just once, but I came away in great awe of her. She was so poetic when she spoke, so beautiful in her use of language. What awed me even more was her humility. You couldn't quite believe this was the person who had inspired millions."

Consisting of a prologue, two acts and epilogue, the opera unfolds as a series of flashbacks in which the dying Princess Magogo relives key moments from her life, including the exile of her father, King Dinuzulu, the Zulu uprising against British rule and the political marriage into which she enters to preserve tribal unity. Before she joins her ancestors in the afterlife, they celebrate her in a grand choral finale.

The 72-year-old Mzilikasi Khumalo is a distinguished composer and an emeritus professor of African languages at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa. Years before writing the opera, he had arranged eight of the princess' songs for an original song cycle titled "Sing, Great Princess." The cycle became a kind of study for "Princess Magogo," which also incorporates original music by its subject.

A hybrid music

The opera draws on the richly hybrid music known as *makwaya* — a fusion of traditional indigenous elements with Western oratorio and hymnody. It is permeated by the melodies, harmonies and rhythms of Zulu music. The vocal writing closely follows the rising, falling and gliding contours of native speech, with its distinctive clicks of the tongue.

WFMT Vice President Steve Robinson recalls that many attending the premiere in Durban in 2002 wore traditional native attire, and that during the opera there was a good deal of spontaneous interaction between listeners and performers, as is customary at Zulu gatherings.

Beyond appreciating the virtues of "Princess Magogo's" richly textured, often deeply moving music, story and stagecraft, people listening to the work in the theater or over the radio sensed they were witnessing history in the making.

Christopher Ballantine underscored the point at the end of his lengthy review in Opera magazine. "If, as so many in South Africa hope, the 21st is to be the 'African century,'" he wrote, "this opera is likely to be looked back upon as an important early herald."

Digging deep: Nancy Duguid, who is receiving treatment for breast cancer, has survived the odds to see her opera staged at the Spier Summer Arts Festival.



GOOD things

A celebration of life spirit

Theatre director Nancy Duiguid, the co-librettist of the new contemporary South African opera *earthdiving* currently on at Spier, understands the true meaning of personal transformation, writes **Fiona Chisholm**



Sisters in arms: Ntombizodumo Mahlaba (Namdende) embraces Philisa Sibeko (Nokwanda) in *earthdiving*.

Technology meets San rituals

THE NEW South African opera *earthdiving* was inspired by San initiation rituals and world mythology. Director Nancy Duiguid and associate director Nan Hamilton combine the simplicity and immediacy of ritual with cutting edge technology.

The music and text draw on a variety of influences with a South African identity. The award-winning and professional cast of singers and dancers, alongside the chamber orchestra and African percussionists, move the audience to unexpected places.

THIS Buddhist and contemplative thinker who was close to death at Christmas was forced to dive deeply into her soul for courage to carry on the fight to live and to complete the barely-finished opera for the premiere on March 7.

That she succeeded was due to good medical care and her remarkable spirit, which earned her an unprecedented bouquet from her cast on opening night. Actress Aletta Bezuidenhout stepped forward at curtain call to tell the audience how privileged all felt to work with Duiguid. In spite of "cancer, chemotherapy and days when she could hardly walk", she had never had a harsh word for anyone.

Duiguid is being treated for breast cancer, which has spread to her bones and liver. In December radiation to her spine severely hit her immune system, knocking out her white cells. She wasn't expected to walk again.

Yet when I met her in the rehearsal room a few days before opening night, the slender figure in a black trouser suit was darting around energetically directing Abel Moeng, Philisa Sibeko and Mandlekozi Mkhize for the final scene of the opera.

"I'm living on two dimensions," she said in her attractive American-English twang. "I live from day to day, now having chemo every week, but know that if plan B happens I want to be prepared. I want to be aware of the fascinating process of dying. I don't want to suffer pain or be so drugged I don't know what is going on.

"I was suffering up to about three weeks ago but this drug I'm now on takes the pain away. So I'm feeling terribly excited. I have a lot of energy and maybe the miracle will be happen. But I'm thankful now for every day. It's a miracle I'm here. I'm celebrating

another Lazarus rising."

Duiguid was born in Kentucky, USA 54 years ago and settled in England in 1972 where she enjoyed an award-winning directorial career directing for the English National Opera Company, making films for Channel 4 and the British Film Institute and freelancing in Japan and Australia. When she settled in Johannesburg in 1999 she met actress Nan Hamilton, a member of MaOyaMa, a group of six women (including Aletta Bezuidenhout) who asked her to direct a serious women's play for the millennium.

Unfortunately funding was not forthcoming but Hamilton and Duiguid decided to continue on their own and to tackle an opera. Over three years in two separate cities, in between a baby for Cape Town-based Hamilton "who brought huge passion to the project" and Duiguid's illness, the pair completed the work for Spier.

"The opening night was a little subdued," said Duiguid, "I've heard it with a lot more passion but I'm sure by the last night (March 15) it will really come on fire. The reviews have been critical and fair and it seems we have touched enough people to justify going on with it.

"I've learnt a lot from my first libretto. For instance in an opera your subtext is your music. That has been a major learning point. I sure would love to go back and start all over again but at the same time I think we have hit moments that are rather exciting and beautiful.

"Because the music was only completed at the last minute things were pretty tight and tough at the end. I could have put it off but I may not be here later. Selfishly I was determined to go for it. It's been a monumental thing to get the support to bring a project like this together and the wonderful cast have worked extremely hard."

She explains that the term *earthdiving* is based on a San ritual.

"You go into a trance to dive into the earth of your soul, not literally the earth of the ground. Out of that you bring some personal transformation and often a gift to your community.

"The opera is a story of an archetypal family and a community, living in both this world and the underworld, who go through powerful tensions of power, love and revenge to reach forgiveness, reconciliation and compassion. They learn to transform certain emotions which have become destructive for the good of the world."

The music has undergone its own rather turbulent journey. It had to be salvaged by Cape Town composer Peter-Louis van Dijk when the commission proved too much for talented Mokale Koapeng. Duiguid also called on English musician Martin Phipps, who has written film music for her, to compose the music for the two underworld scenes.

"I think the contrast in the writing is refreshing," she said. "Van Dijk is the more classically trained musician and Phipps is more minimalist and contemporary composer."

The responsibility of bringing the new score to life in the hands and mouths of the Cape Philharmonic has been given to Xandi van Dijk, son of Peter-Louis and a member of the upcoming Sontonga Quartet. He's done his father proud.

Opera music hits discord

EARTH DIVING

Reviewer: Carl Fourie
Librettist-Director: Nancy Duiguid, Nan Hamilton
Soloists: Aletta Bezuidenhout, James Stent, Ntombizudumo Mahlaba, Phillisa Sibeko, Mandlenkosi Mkhize, Abel Moeng, Miranda Tini
Venue: Spier Amphitheatre until Saturday

EARTH DIVING is the latest opera to come from the African crucible of cultures reaching out to each other.

The opera is built firmly on African folklore, yet speaks of universal themes, such as familial relationships and the need for forgiveness and restoration.

The music has been written by three people: Peter Louis van Dijk, Martin Phipps and Mokale Koapeng. It would have been most helpful if a pre-performance talk – such as is now customary with Cape Town Opera productions – had been arranged, specifically to deal with aspects of this never-heard-before score.

Consequently, one is left guessing as to what proportion each of these three writers contributed to the score, as well as other aspects such as influences, choice of instrumentation and overall approach.

Various musical traditions are detectable: jazz, African percussion, staccato wind writing ala Stravinsky, and considerable homage to the lushness of film music by strings in at least two scenes. All this has been blended into a Western orchestral backdrop.

But the last half-hour of the score gets bogged down. Harmonic rhythms change slowly, and the vocal writing is too often monosyllabic with few small-note values adding interest. The onstage pace fizzles out, with a resultant loss of interest from the audience.

Vocal writing is not always satisfactory. Lines are generally melodically constructed and not particularly angular. But choosing two soprano and two baritone leads leaves one with limited vocal variation, especially in the middle registers.

Nor does it make sense to give a baritone a speaking paragraph against a 50-strong orchestra busy with a crescendo. Or in writing exposed bass chorus lines so low that the result is an indeterminate rumble that could be anything.

Musically, the second scene was the most successful, primarily because it was in contrast to the rest of the score. The opening featured a monotonic ode to hip hop, against a backdrop of pounding, climaxing rhythms, and a full orchestral score with cornucopic string writing.

From a librettist point of view,



Ill-prepared? Ntombizudumo Mahlaba did not live up to her performance in *Macbeth*.

the work may as well have been written in an indigenous language, which could suit the context of the opera better. If the idea in writing the work in English is to take the production overseas, it has backfired badly: quite frankly, every singer's diction was shocking, and if it wasn't for the surtitle machine, one would be left in the dramatic dark.

Set design by Sarah Calburn was an eclectic and effective use of lights, projections and symbolic womb-like cocoons. But the presence of real-life props, like the broom and wheelchair, was incongruous; so too the isolated directional fiat of the Child perched on top of a supporting pillar, when all other action takes place at ground level.

Costume design was by Black Coffee. These were mostly evocative and effective. They varied from colourful traditional dresses to pseudo-space age outfits. But the Wild One's costume was just silly. Maybe the intent was comic relief in an opera that is rather heavy, but appearing at the end of the production (that had now bogged down) just irritated one more than anything else.

The chorus varied in function from the Greek concept of indifferent commentary, to an active part in the outworking of the plot. But their stilted movements didn't impress. Maybe it was because the movements were inapt, or because the chorus wasn't really interested, or because they are amateurs, or a combination of the above.

Nor was their singing up to scratch. Daniel Mestre has not succeeded in welding these singers into a team. Consonants were not pronounced together, sopranos were shrill, cusemble between the voices was strained, basses had little carrying power. The four lead singers failed to impress as well.

Indeed, it is a tragedy to premiere a work with singers who are not yet vocally ready (or who are ill-prepared). Apart from having an unpleasant edge to their voices, Ntombizudumo Mahlaba (Namdende) and Phillisa Sibeko (Nokwande) also failed to sustain top notes without sliding downwards on them.

Sibeko and Mandlenkosi Mkhize (Senyaka) are vocally too young to pull off such big roles. They do not have carrying power, the former especially sounding very thin on occasion.

The more experienced Abel Moeng (Sango) also does not convince vocally. And Mahlaba and Miranda Tini (Baubo) failed to live up to their superb performances in *Macbeth* 18 months ago.

The star of the show, ironically for an opera, is the Speaker and dramatic catalyst, most wonderfully portrayed by Aletta Bezuidenhout. Her vocal inflections were painstakingly chosen for maximum effect. Her costume and make-up was also most effective.

Second prize goes to Boyzi Cekwana for the choreograph of the abduction scene. Again the costumes and make-up of the dancers were most striking. An full marks to the dancers for an energised performance: Kwe Davani, Richard Mbovani, Collin Tontsi and Hurge Cornelison.

In short, the problem with the work is not the concept or the stagecraft, but the score and libretto. The first half is good stuff, but the energy just dissipates. Small consolation for Nancy Duiguid and Nan Hamilton, for whom this has been three-year labour of love.

Earthdiving opera sees Cekwana back in SA

EARTHDIVING opens at Spier Amphitheatre on Friday. **ANDREW GILDER** previews.

BOYZIE CEKWANA is in Cape Town having squeezed in his contribution to the new South African opera *earthdiving* between dates in Paris and Brussels.

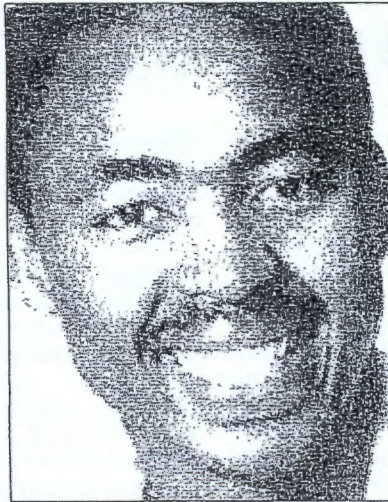
Cekwana is part of the new breed of South African choreographers whose work has attained international profile, and his role in the *earthdiving* creative process marks his debut in the opera arena.

Cape Town is no stranger to Cekwana's work. Last year Durban's Fantastic Flying Fish Dance Company presented his danced version of Can Themba's *The Suit*, while Cekwana himself performed the lead in *Ja-Nee* which featured on the programme of the final FNB Dance Indaba. *Ja-Nee* is presently keeping Cekwana, and partner Desiré Davids, away from South Africa.

Dealing with the issue of Aids, *Ja-Nee* marks an artistic development for Cekwana in that it is both movement work and art installation. Once the choreography has been completed audience-members are invited to inspect the stage. Cekwana and Davids put the finishing touches to *Ja-Nee* during a January-residency at the National Centre for Dance in Paris, and the work enjoys its European premier in Brussels later this month. Between those two commitments Cekwana has been assisting writers Nancy Diuguid and Nan Hamilton in breathing life into their opera *earthdiving*.

The word 'earthdiving' has been described as "a shamanic term that refers to the descent of the human spirit into the subtle realms of the unconscious to awaken change in oneself". Cekwana sees the piece as being about "diving into the soul so as to re-connect with the light within ourselves".

The work was inspired by San initiation rituals and world mythology and the story revolves around the restoration of family relationships when these have been broken down. Dance is often merely an addendum



OPERATIC: Cast member Abel Moeng.

to the action of an opera, but this is not the case with *earthdiving*.

"The development of character has been an intellectual and physical process and interpretations have emerged from a collaboration with the artistic team" says Cekwana. "The writers come from a different cultural context different from that of the characters," he notes. "A lot of work was needed to imbue the characters with tangible cultural substance."

Dancers Yarisha Singh and Hergen Cornelssen appear to take on different aspects. An interesting theatrical device is to have the dancers represent the shadows of the characters of the lovers. Singh, for example, is the Eland spirit representing the girl. "This allows the dancers to physicalise the intent underlying the actions of the characters," says Cekwana. Mokale Koapeng, Martin Phipps and Peter Louis van Dijk conceived of the score as a dialogue between African, choral and ritual music with European contemporary, classical and operatic music and jazz.

The cast includes Mandlenkosi Mkhize, Abel Moeng, Philisa Sibeko, and Miranda Tini. Costumes are by Black Coffee. The set was designed by Sarah Calburn and created by Laury le Roux.

● Book at Computicket or call 021 809 1177/78/79/49.

Cape Times

06 March 2003

Nuwe opera vol emosie

PIETER KOOU

OPERA: *earthdiving*, 'n werk in een bedryf deur Péter Loui van Dijk, Martin Phipps en Mokale Koapeng op 'n libretto van Nancy Diuguid en Nan Hamilton. Met Aletta Bezuidenhout, sangers, dansers, die Kaapstadse Operakoor en die Kaapse Filharmoniese Orkes met Xandi van Dijk as dirigent. In the Spier-amfiteater, naby Stellenbosch.

VIR die wêreldpremière van dié nuwe Suid-Afrikaanse opera was die amfiteater Vrydagaand ver van vol. Gaan die enigszins pretensieuse maar kleurrike, melodieryke en interessante teaterervaring vir sy verdere drie opvoerings vandeeweek (Woensdag, Vrydag en Saterdag) beter bywoning trek?

earthdiving het 'n proloog en sewe tonele.

Die libretto is gebaseer op die Griekse mitologiese verhaal van Demeter, godin van die landbou, wat ons miskien beter onder die Romeinse naam Ceres ken. Haar dogter Persephone, ook bekend as Proserpina, word deur Pluto, god van die dood, na die onderwêreld ge-

bring, verneder en uiteindelik met haar moeder herenig.

Geïnspireer deur San-rituele word Demeter/Ceres die opera se Namdende (gesing deur Ntombizodumo Mahlaba). Haar dogter is Nokwanda (gesing deur Philisa Sibeko), en die twee mansrolle word vertolk deur Mandlenkosi Mkhize en Abel Moeng.

Emosies soos wraak, droefheid, liefde, alleenheid, maglus en uiteindelik vergiffenis word ontgin.

Die opera word in Engels gesing, en daarby word die teks met bokskefles geflits. En dit is hier waar die probleem vir my lê: Daar is 'n geaffekteerdheid sonder om digterlik te wees wat hierdie té duidelike teks nie kan oorbrug nie.

Péter Loui van Dijk, wat die meeste van die musiek geskryf het, toon uitstekende teaterbewustheid en dramatiese aanvoeling. Die musiek is maklik luisterbaar sonder om oppervlakkig te wees en smelt goed saam met die ritmiese tradisionele Afrika-geïnspireerde musiek van Martin Phipps se onderwêreld-tonele.

Xandi van Dijk, die komponis se seun, het as dirigent geïmponeer. Hy het die verskillende deelnemers

goed bymekaargehou en meestal goeie balans verseker.

Die twee libretto-skrywers het ook as regisseurs opgetree. Die gang was meestal heel flink, met effektiewe wisseling tussen dramatiese en meer liriese tonele. Die kleurrike kostuums, eenvoudige maar doelmatige dekor, atmosferiese beligting en energieke choreografie het die visuele impak verder verdiep. Terloops: die rooi kostuum vir "die wilde een" wat Miranda Tini van nek tot tone bedek het, is seker die wildste (vulgêrste?) wat ek al in ons land gesien het.

Mahlaba se Namdende had groot emosie, maar haar mooi stem was nie altyd ewe afgerond nie, Sibeko se soet stem het soms yl geraak, en Mkhize het by tye uitbundiger gesing as wat sy mooi stem regtig kon behartig. Moeng as Sango was die sangster van die aand wat in weerwil van sy klein rol geskitter het.

Die koor se bydrae was goed, maar nie onberispelik of uitstekend nie. Eintlik is ons gewoond aan klankryke en meer afgeronde sang van die Kaapstadse Operakoor.

Die aktrise Aletta Bezuidenhout en die seun James Stent het die verhaal doeltreffend bymekaargehou.

Die Burger
10 March 2003

New African work of art hits high note

EARTHDIVING. Music by Peter Louis van Dijk, Mokale Koapeng and Martin Phipps. Libretto by Nancy Duiguid and Nan Hamilton. Choreography by Boyzie Cekwana. Set design by Sarah Calburn. Costume design by Black Coffee. Lighting design by Kobus Rossouw. With Aletta Bezuidenhout, James Stent, Ntombizoduma Mahlaba, Philisa Sibeko, Mandlenkosi Mkhize, Abel Moeng, Miranda Tini, Kwezi Davani, Richard Mbovane and Colin Tontsi. Cape Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Xandi van Dijk. At Spier until Saturday. **WILHELM SNYMAN** reviews.

SPIER Amphitheatre was dazzled this weekend with the premiere of *Earthdiving*, a new South African opera, garnering an extraordinary array of talent.

Based on a fusion of the Greek and African mythology, this libretto takes the basic structure of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone and places it in an African milieu, echoing similarly shamanic notions in African culture.

This transposing of the heritage of ancient Greece into an African context is in itself nothing new, with the famed Italian writer and filmmaker doing likewise in his 1969 film *Appunti per un'Orestiada africana*. In the Duiguid-Hamilton libretto the themes embodied by Demeter, the goddess of agriculture, of the harvest, and of grain are echoed by Namkende, mother earth (sung by Ntombizoduma Mahlaba), a type of the earth goddess and the mother goddess. Persephone, the Maiden of Spring is echoed by Nokwanda (sung by Philisa Sibeko.)

The work takes us into and out of this world and the underworld as the forces of good and evil vie, until resolution and hard-won forgiveness are achieved.

In the prologue we are introduced to Makor (Aletta Bezuidenhout), the storyteller and guide who remembers mankind's fall from grace and calls on those who are lost to dive into their bodes, the "earth of their soul" to awaken change within. And the Child (sung by James Stent) bears witness.

We meet Namkende (Ntombizoduma Mahlaba), mother earth, who gives birth to Nokwanda (Philisa Sibeko) who grows up overprotected in her mother's love and befriended by an eland spirit. Nokwanda challenges her mother's silence about Sango, her absent father. From deep within the earth Nokwanda hears the calling of the underworld and begins to move away from her mother's restrictive domain. At Makor's behest Nokwanda begins her earthdive.



ETERNAL THEME: Philisa Sibeko as Nokwanda and Mandlenkosi Mkhize as Senyaka, the two lovers, in a scene from *Earthdiving* at the Spier Summer Arts Festival. Picture: KARIN RETIEF

Enter Senyaka (Mandlenkosi Mkhize), who seduces Nokwanda and takes her with him into his underworld where he showers her with the riches of his kingdom. But she rejects him and he discovers his real love for her even though he has revealed to her the deal he made with Sango his brother (Abel Moeng) to acquire Nokwanda. Resolution comes when Sango acknowledges the wrongs he has committed and the harm he has caused others. Nokwanda is called back and reaches out to her mother. With forgiveness the bounty of the earth returns and the brothers Senyaka and Sango succumb to their earthdives.

Ntombizoduma Mahlaba triumphs in the difficult role Namkende. It is indeed wonderful to hear and see Ntombizoduma Mahlaba on stage again (married to another rising SA opera star, Luzuko Mahlaba, currently in Germany). Ever since her role as Clotilda in the 1998 production of Bellini's *Norma*, she has been one to watch.

In this role she dominates the opening scenes through her stage presence which almost renders her extravagant costume superfluous. She sustains a strong stage presence throughout and has mastered with confidence an arduously difficult score. To back her up she has Philisa Sibeko who conveys her troubled role Nokwanda. It is also a great pleasure to see Abel Moeng on stage again as Sango who is Father Sky.

A fine voice we have, too, in Mandlenkosi Mkhize's Senyaka who had also mastered with aplomb a score filled with unpredictable changes in melody line.

Orchestral playing under the baton of Xandi van Dijk was engaging throughout, with the strings lending a strong primal force to the overall musical effect, further sustained by Dewet Bruwer on piano.

The sheer spectacle of *Earthdiving* is sustained by the imaginative choreography and lush costuming.

Earthdiving is a monumental work, and for what it lacks in substance, it compensates for with spectacle.

The libretto, reflecting the often complex and necessarily illogical realm of myth is at times confusing, with significance imparted in a somewhat arbitrary fashion.

Duiguid and Hamilton were perhaps trying to say too much and the libretto would perhaps be more effective if honed down to the more essential elements.

That said, vast talents went into making this an extraordinary work and an engaging operatic experience. It is inspiring to see people harnessing so much creativity into bringing a new work of art to life.

March 14 to 19 2003

Bravo!

Not even New Age clichés have put a damper on the opera season of the Spier Summer Arts Festival, writes **Guy Willoughby**.

Earthdiving represents a brave departure for the questing Spier Summer Arts Festival in the Stellenbosch winelands — an event that has become de rigueur viewing for discerning arts patrons in the Cape.

Innovation is the watchword: in the 2000/01 season theatre-goers were wowed and startled by the elaborate ensemble work of the London-based Broomfield Opera Company, which created pacy polyglot hybrids, brimful of local idiom, out of well-known works of the European musical-theatre and operatic repertoire.

This season artistic director Delecia Forbes and her team went further by commissioning a wholly new indigenous opera. Such an event would have been impossible without the technical and vocal resources of Cape Town Opera — seasoned veterans of the Cape's operatic productions over the past decade. The laudably high standard of voices on stage owes much to this fine company.

The pity is that the result of so much creative ferment and manifold industry proves disappointing. The problem with *Earthdiving* is the old South African bugbear of fudged artistic purpose: what might have been a salutary idea in the brain of a controlling visionary backfires in the minds of a committee. Many hands in the theatre do not necessarily make light work; or to change the metaphor, one cook in charge is needed to save the broth.

Writers Nancy Duigud and Nan Hamilton of the Dedel'Ingoma Music-Theatre Company try to interweave Greek mythology — specifically the death-in-winter, rebirth-in-spring myth of Demeter and Pluto — with an African look and vocabulary owing much, apparently, to Khoisan ritual.



Mandlenkosi Mkhize and Philisa Sibeko as the two lovers Senyaka and Nokwanda in *Earthdiving*

However, their text is overburdened with feel-good New Age clichés, and the characters are thinly-sketched allegorical figures (“mother earth”, “child”, “the daughter”, “father sky”).

How are we to take this cast of windily self-important characters? The librettists believe with the utmost gravity, but it is hard to work up enthusiasm for two-dimensional ciphers who float in a kind of vaguely mythic dawn-time that lacks specificity or content — especially as these ciphers deliver speeches of turgid pseudo-poetic prose.

Sarah Calburn's set design, too, alongside costumes by Black Coffee — the work, presumably, of another committee — cement an impression of muddle, with haphazard placing of arbitrary props and equally haphazard costume accessories.

Musically, the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra under the spirited Xandi van Dijk tries valiantly to enliven a score that suffers from diverse hands.

Mokale Koapeng's original score was completed by Martin Phipps and Peter Louis van Dijk (Xandi's father); although there are plausible brass climaxes and attractive string-textured passages of what movie-soundtrack writers call “mood music”, able orchestration cannot salvage divided conceptual purpose.

The details

Earthdiving, last of the Spier Opera Season, is presented on March 14 and 15. For more information and to book: Tel: 809 1177 / 78 or visit the website: www.spier.co.za

Spier opera season in full voice

From page 1

There are notable performances. Marvellous mezzo-soprano Ntombizodumo Mahlaba is stirring as Namende (mother earth); her daughter Nokwanda, lyrical soprano Philisa Sibeko, has plangency and fragile grace. Baritone Mandlenkosi Mkhize oozes sex appeal as Senyaka, lord of the dead, and Abel Mōeng, ground-trembling bass, wins the stage with convincing gravitas as "father sky".

One feels the voices and acting skills of all these richly talented practitioners — including the Cape Town Opera chorus, under Daniel Mestre — deserve a stronger scenario.

All this is a pity because the Spier opera season has been marked by variety and vision amid professionalism — and buoyant houses in the 100-seater amphitheatre. Most telling is to compare *Earthdriving* with the other indigenous opera on the bill, *The Confessions of Zeno*. Here Janie Taylor's pared but resonant libretto was finely cojoined with the Hand-

spring Company's ingenious puppetry, Kevin Volens's magically taut string quartet and William Kentridge's eerie, psyche-searing animation.

The trick is that all these elements were held together in spine-tingling tension by a controlling imagination — Kentridge's. One also sensed that, in this unique African meditation on the mores of turn-of-the-20th-century European culture, every role-player had a clear view of their immediate task — and of the greater task at hand.

Ravishing in another way was Paul Stern's production of *La Traviata*, which playfully turned Verdi's tale of bohemian raffishness into a tongue-in-cheek study of romantic cliché, with a risqué staging that upset some and woke up many.

The other mainstream opera, Engelbert Humperdinck's *Hänsel and Gretel*, became in director Janice Honeyman's hands a fairy tale with a strongly local visual idiom — "shack-chic" interiors, bright with zesty logos and tinned-food label offcuts — and entirely convincing through an excellent cast.

Each of these productions variously demonstrated the world-class calibre of our voices — both choral and individual — and the rich, mature vision of those at the directorial helm. Creating a stage work with the various components that opera requires is a daunting task: on present showing *Earthdriving* requires a determined single vision — and a ruthless rewrite — before being worthy of its first-class cast.

Guy Willoughby is African correspondent of the New York-based Opera News.



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APPENDIX E

- Daniel, R. 1988. Ambience 'horror' opera, *The Citizen*: 21, November 29.
- Eichbaum, J. 1989. South Africa prizewinning première, *Opera*. 40: 346.
- Eichbaum, J. 1989. Première of a new South African opera: 'The Fall of the House of Usher', *Scenaria*. 96: 6-8.
- Farquharson, M. 1988. Hofmeyr adds a gothic touch, *The Pretoria News*: 2, November 25.
- Grové, S. 1988. Hofmeyr se Poe-opera was 'n historiese gebeurtenis, *Rapport: Musiek-Rapport*: 24, December 4.
- Heyneman, L. 1988. *Usher* is knap inheemse opera. *Vrye Weekblad*: December 2. (See appendix E: 5)
- Odendaal, T. 1988. 'n Gebeurtenis sonder die gala. *Beeld*: November 21. (See appendix E: 7)
- Odendaal, T. 1988. Om opera as opera te behou. *Beeld*: November 24. (See appendix E: 8)
- Smit, P. 1988. Hofmeyr achieves a lot with little. *The Star Tonight*: 4, November 28.
- Smith, B. 1988. Hofmeyr's horror lingers on. *Sunday Star*: November 27. (See appendix E: 9)
- Viljoen, H. 1988. Operageskiedenis in Staatsteater. *Transvaler Applous*: December 1. (See appendix E: 10)
- Van Rensburg, R. 1988. Opera's impact reverberates. *PTA News Tonight*: 16, November 28.

THE "workshopped" staging of Hendrik Hofmeyr's winning entry in the 1986/87 Opera Competition organised by the Department of National Education is an auspicious event.

The music, played by a string quartet including a bass but not a second violin, a wind quartet plus horn, harp and a galaxy of percussions, provides the ominously atmospheric background to Poe's doleful tale of dissipation and destruction; the libretto (in English), a faithful yet imaginative rendition of the narrative line.

To the uninitiated ear, the very "modern" vocal melodies may seem lacking in tonal colour contrast, leaving most of the

THE OPERA: The Fall of the House of Usher
(Arena, State Theatre, Pretoria)
THE CAST: Johan Botha, Willie van Staden, Pierre du Toit, Mari Opperman, Dewald Norval, Drummond Marais
THE CONDUCTOR: Neville Dove
THE DIRECTOR: Michael Williams

By Raeford Daniel

suading and dynamics to the orchestra, but the arias are idiomatic and sensitively attuned to the mood and purpose of the story, a fine example of Gothic "ambience horror".

The music is, perhaps, more demanding than we may at first suppose. It includes a three-part soprano aria, a cataclysmic mad scene and some neatly ordered ensembles.

The singers cope supremely well, with pride of place going to the splendid articulation of Johan Botha, a sort of George Kok clone, who plays the narrator.

I found it less easy to follow the words sung by the other members of the cast.

The small ensemble orchestra under the baton of Neville Dove, is first rate. Particularly com-

mendable is the treatment of the fascinating "Fisura" theme, an interlocking of two "diabolic" tritones.

The introduction to the work is spoken by Drummond Marais, whose excellent readings of two other Poe works, *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Black Cat*, form the first half of the programme.

The staging, by PACT Opera by agreement with the Department of National Education and in collaboration with the Pretoria Technikon, is a most commendable expedient. One hopes for an encore, or perhaps even a place in the permanent repertoire. Nadya Cohen's setting is superb.

Hofmeyr se Poe-opera was 'n historiese gebeurtenis

EKSPERIMENTELE teatermusiek moet nog vele hindernisse te bowe kom voordat dit by ons enigins kan floreer.

Die begrip kan gedefinieer word as eenakter-kameroperas met beskeie instrumentele bystand; eksperimenteel in dié sin dat dit binne 'n informele raamwerk volgens die Amerikaanse "workshop"-gebruik aangebied word; waardeur komponiste, sangers, regisseurs en ontwerpers veel kan leer en die publiek die kans gegun word om nuwe werke te leer ken.

Maar in 'n opera-milieu soos ons s'n wat byna geheel en al deur die Italiaanse Romantiek oorheers word, waarin selfs die Duitse Romantiek vierde viool moet speel, en eietydse onproblematiese operas, soos dié van Britten en Menotti slegs sporadies opgevoer word, kan so 'n klimaat nouliks as bevorderlik vir inheemse teatermusiek beskou word.

In die verlede het die streekraade geen belang gestel nie. Die enigste instansie wat na my wete pogings aangewend het om oorspronklike skepping aan te help, is die Departement van Nasionale Opvoeding, wat van tyd tot tyd wedstry-

de uitgeskryf het, maar waarvan 'n groot aantal komponiste salig onbewus was.

Die wenner van die 1986/87-wedstryd was Hendrik Hofmeyr, wat tans in

die Arena van die Staatsteater plaasgevind het, moet as 'n historiese gebeurtenis beskou word omdat dit die eerste ernstige poging van 'n streekraad verteenwoordig om 'n werk op 'n "work-

minute ingeperk en juis hierin lê van die swakhede van die opera, want die tydverloop (een van die belangrikste elemente in operastruktuur) was te vinnig.

Die dramatiese hoogtepunte wat gevolglik vinnig opmekaar gestapel word, is met 'n hoogsbelaaide spanningsdraad van die instrumentale ensemble onderskraag in 'n intensiteit wat meedoënloos voortsnel en min ruimte vir ontspanning en uitdunning laat.

Weliswaar het die komponis sy kamerorkes, bestaande uit vier strykers, vyf blasers en 'n verskeidenheid van slagtuig; met behendigheid en verbeeldingryke idiomatiek gehanteer, maar tog het 'n mens die gewarwording gehad dat te veel intensiteit en te min uitdunning van die algemene sonoriteit in die pad van dramatiese subtiliteit staan.

In tipies Italiaanse tradisie het Hofmeyr sy stemme op cantilena-wyse gebruik, maar helaas verg 'n besonder sterk dramatiese handeling soos hierdie juis 'n deklamerende vokale styl. Miskien is 'n gebrek aan ondervinding te blameer, maar die musikale karaktertekening was geënsins helder genoeg omlym nie.



Deur STEFANS GROVÉ

Italië studeer. Sy inskrywing is 'n eenbedryf-kameropera, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, op eie libretto grond.

Hierdie weninskrywing sou seker soos dergelykes van die verlede op 'n rak beland het as dit nie was vir die ywer van die Pretoriase Technikon se operadepartement, vir die instudering, en vir TRUK se bereidwilligheid om lokaal en musici beskikbaar te stel nie.

Die vier opvoerings wat van 24 tot 27 November in

shop"-grondslag te aanvaar en op te voer

Hofmeyr het in hierdie werk heelwat kundigheid op vokale sowel as instrumentele terrein geopenbaar: Hy het 'n sterk aanvoeling vir die dramatiese en kon sy sterk hoogtepunte met goeie effek volhou.

In hierdie eenbedryf met sy vyf karakters (vier mans en een vrou) en 'n kamerorkes met 12 musici, het Hofmeyr die hoogs dramatiese verhaal van Edgar Allan Poe tot 'n speelduur van 50

PREMIERE OF A NEW SOUTH AFRICAN OPERA

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

Reviewed by Julius Eichbaum

It is perhaps sad to reflect that whilst European and American contemporary composers have contributed compositions of considerable diversity to twentieth century musical literature, South African composers, for the most part, find themselves restricted to works of a smaller scale.

Unlike other countries, South Africa is remarkably slow to recognise the not inconsiderable merit of the works of many of our own composers. Opportunities for performance, particularly for large scale works, are decidedly limited and this has, not unnaturally, led to many of our highly talented composers restricting themselves to writing small scale ensemble pieces in the knowledge that these ultimately are more likely to be performed.

This factor, more than any other, has, I believe, led to opera being relegated to a minor position in the minds of South African composers, despite the fact that our country, with its multiple cultures, must surely offer some outstanding and unique material for an imaginative librettist. In short, with only one or two exceptions such as John Joubert's *Silas Marner* operas by South African composers are indeed rare.

With this shortcoming in mind, the Department of National Education has, for a number of years, sponsored a competition for South African composers in the field of opera. This policy, when first announced, was received with a degree of scepticism by many, yet the international history of such competitions, we should not forget, is liberally sprinkled with some remarkable success stories. It was, after all, an unknown Pietro Mascagni who at the age of 27, won just such a competition, sponsored by the publisher Sonzogno, in 1890 with his *Cavallaria Rusticana* and how much poorer we would all be today were it not for Sonzogno's foresight.

Few competitions today are likely to produce a work of such importance which is going to take the operatic world by storm in the same manner as 'Cav' did, but the 1986/87 National Education Opera Competition did produce a most remarkable winning entry which one fervently hopes will not be relegated to some dusty attic after a handful of performances. Certainly, it is a work, which at the very least, should encourage other composers to enter the operatic arena.

The award winning entry, Hendrik Hofmeyr's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, was premiered on 24 November in the Arena of the State Theatre, Pretoria, in a joint production staged by PACT Opera and the opera school of the Pretoria Technikon.

Hofmeyr's opera, utilizing his own libretto based upon

the supernatural short story by Edgar Allan Poe is ingenious and skilfully crafted. Although one cannot describe the work as being derivative in any way, it does owe much to outside influences particularly Benjamin Britten, especially in its economic scoring for twelve musicians which is reminiscent of *Turn of the Screw*, coincidentally another opera with sinister connotations forming the basis for the plot. Hofmeyr's scoring is unusual in that it consists of solo violin, viola, cello and bass, a wind quartet (including bass clarinet), plus horn, harp

*Mari Opperman (Madeline), Pierre du Toit (Usher)
and Willie van Staden (Friend)*



and a battery of percussion instruments. His use of these instruments is remarkably full sounding (rather in the same manner as Strauss achieved in *Ariadne auf Naxos* wherein he used 33 instruments) yet much of the score also demands exceptional virtuosity on the part of the musicians, particularly in the many and varied passages of chamber music-like delicacy.

Although modern in concept, the score does not make undue demands upon the listener more attuned to a readily identifiable melodic line. Visual imagery is skilfully mirrored in every bar of the score which instils in the listener an eerie and growing sense of unease as Poe's masterful Gothic horror plot unfolds.

Hofmeyr's score makes considerable demands on the musicians and conductor Neville Dove succeeded admirably in obtaining virtuosic playing from his band of hand-picked musicians, all key members of the National Orchestra. Dove achieved a rare degree of cohesion between the musical line and singers and the unqualified success of this première was largely due to his total dedication at every level.

The cast, all students at the Pretoria Technikon Opera



School... gave well rounded performances, which bore testimony to the high standard of training young singers receive at the Opera School.

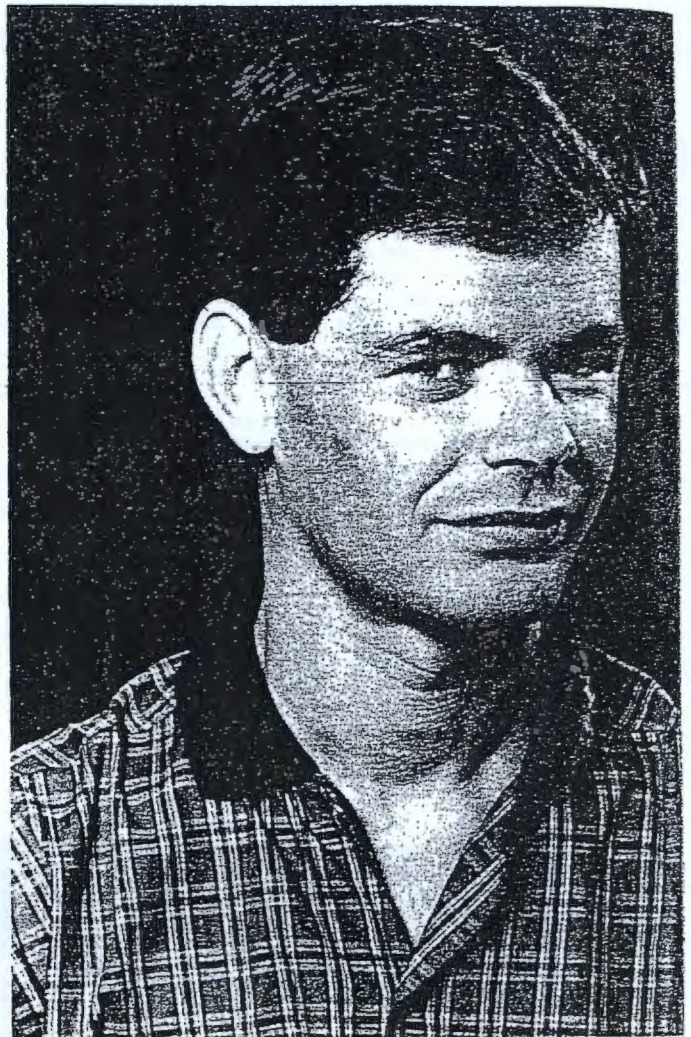
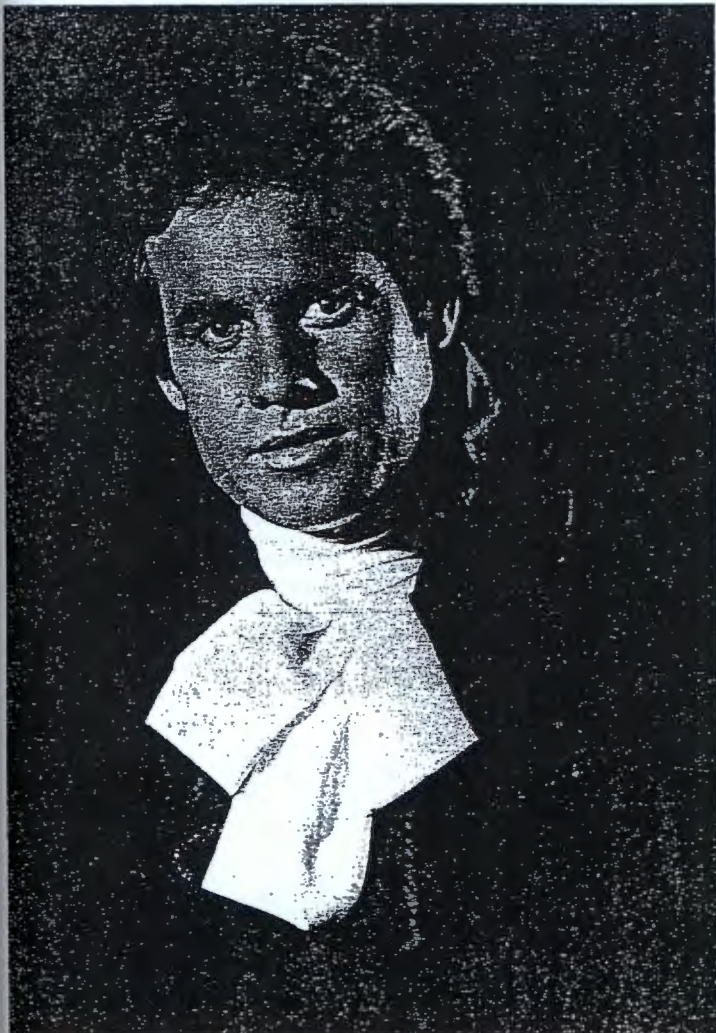
Johan Botha, as the Narrator, impressed the most with his clear diction, nobility of bearing and his bell-like light heldentenor voice. Is this a potential Peter Grimes in the making?

Pierre du Toit as Roderick Usher was almost as impressive but he, together with the rest of the cast, lacked Botha's clear diction. Indeed, the major drawback in this staging was the lack of attention given to clear annunciation.

Mari Opperman as Madeline Usher gave a well rounded performance although the voice is marred somewhat by a 'whiteness' of sound which does not allow for much in the way of vocal shading.

Dewald Norval as the Servant and Willie van Staden as

Willie van Staden, The Friend



Hendrik Hofmeyr, the composer of The Fall of the House of Usher was born in Cape Town in 1957. After completing a B.Mus in musicology as well as M.Mus in piano (under Laura Searle), he continued his studies in Italy. He completed the corso superiore in piano at the Florence Conservatory where he was a student of Alessandro Specchi and in composition under Ivan Vandor at the Bologna conservatory, where he twice won the composition prize.

In 1986 (his final year), Hofmeyr's cantate The Death of Cleopatra was chosen for performance at the International Festival of conservatories in Rimini. In the same year his first opera, Il Principe Barbablu was performed at the Stia Music Festival.

At present Hendrik Hofmeyr is studying conducting in Florence.

the Friend were well cast.

The production itself was particularly well conceived by Michael Williams who, with the aid of Nadya Cohen's brilliantly atmospheric set and Mark Cummings stylish lighting design, succeeded admirably in capturing the stark Gothic horror of the piece without having to resort to stage gimmickry of any kind. It was this deliberate underplaying of the stage action which lent the production added dramatic impact. ●

South Africa Prizewinning premiere

Pretoria. With one or two notable exceptions such as John Joubert's *Silas Marner* (1961), operas by South African composers are a comparative rarity, perhaps because of difficulties encountered in a country where audiences are more attuned to the established repertory. The Department of National Education, however, has endeavoured to create a more favourable climate for them by sponsoring a national opera competition. A clear vindication of this far-sighted policy was provided by Hendrik Hofmeyr's one-act *The Fall of the House of Usher*, winner of the 1986-7 competition. This received its premiere on November 24 in the ARENA, a small experimental part of the STATE THEATRE, as a joint production by PACT OPERA and the OPERA SCHOOL of the PRETORIA TECHNIKON. The event was also something of an operatic milestone in this country which I hope will serve to encourage other composers in the future.

Hofmeyr possesses a remarkable talent for the theatre, and his second opera (his first, *Il Principe Barbalu*, was premiered at the Stia Music Festival in 1986) reveals his considerable musicianship. Although it is not in the least derivative, one detects a distinct influence of Britten in Hofmeyr's remarkably fresh musical writing, with its unerring ability for orchestration as well as a natural feeling for the voice. With an English libretto by the composer based on Poe's story, *Usher* employs only 12 musicians: four strings, five wind, harp and a battery of percussion. With handpicked musicians from the National Orchestra, Neville Dove's conducting obtained virtuoso performances from them and a rare degree of cohesion between the musical and vocal lines which place considerable demands on players and singers alike.

The unqualified success of the premiere was largely the result of Dove's total dedication at every level, with a particularly high standard among singers drawn from the Opera School. Considering the work's difficulties this bore testimony to the high level of voice training currently in this country. Johan Botha (Narrator) impressed the most with his clear diction, nobility of bearing and his bell-like Heldentenor: is this a Peter Grimes in the making? Pierre du Toit (Roderick Usher) was almost as impressive but he, with the rest of the cast, lacked Botha's clear diction. Mari

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A scene from *The Fall of the House of Usher* in Pretoria, with (l. to r.) Johan Botha (Narrator), Mari Opperman (Madeline) and Pierre du Toit (Roderick Usher)

Opperman (Madeline Usher) gave a well-rounded performance in spite of a whiteness of sound that did not allow for much vocal shading, and Dewald Norval (Servant) and Willie van Staden (Friend) were well cast.

The production was particularly well conceived by Michael Williams who, with the aid of Nadya Cohen's brilliantly atmospheric set and Mark Cummings's stylish lighting design, admirably succeeded in capturing the stark Gothic horror of the piece without having to resort to stage gimmickry of any kind. Indeed, it was the deliberate underplaying of the stage action which lent the production added dramatic impact.

JULIUS EICHBAUM.

Usher is knap inheemse opera

The Fall of the House of Usher

Kamer-opera gebaseer op die verhaal van Edgar Allen Poe.
Opgevoer deur Truk Opera en die Pretoria Technikon.
In die Staatsteater se Arena, Pretoria.
Louis Heyneman skryf oor die première

geskiedkundige oomblik dié 'n Opera deur 'n jong Suid-Afrikanci op
blanke voor ander Suid-Afrikancers en boonop met staatsgeld.
Hendrik Hofmeyr se kort kamera-opera, *The Fall of the House of Usher*,
die weninskrywing in 'n kompetisie van die Departement van
Nasionale Opvoeding - en was dit nie daarvoor nie, was 'n opvoering van
interessante werk 'n onmoontlikheid.
Hofmeyr se opera is geen obskure, akademiese vingeroefening gebaseer
op Poe se vreemde verhale nie. Dit is veel eerder 'n knap,
gepireerde stuk vakmanskap waarvan die impak eers later ten volle
duidelik sal kan word. Poe se romantiese beheptheid met die bo-natuurlike,
verromantisering van die Gotiese riller, kan maklik lei tot
oeweriger satiriserings: 'n tong-in-die-kies kykie uit 'n gesofistiseerde
19de eeu. Hofmeyr het dié versoeking weerstaan deur 'n fyn
skende musikale atmosfeer te skep, 'n atmosfeer waarin al die nuances
van die materiaal belang word - noukeurig en weldeurdrag.
Struktureel is die opera 'n samevatting van tipiese elemente van die
genre, spaarsamig en minimalisties ingespan. Die minimalisme is ook heg
teef in die klanktekstuur - veral met die effektiewe gebruik van 'n klein
tal instrumente.
Dieselfde geld ook vir die gebruik van tematiese materiaal - elke
detail, hoe klein ook al, is funksioneel.
Nadya Cohen se ontwerpe gee teatraal en verkwiklik gestalte aan *The
Fall of the House of Usher*. Die Gotiese koppelplare, wat uiteindelik die
afsluiting van 'n fraai klein mooi-og-duidelik word en die yslike krokodil
glibberig die ewige donkertes afgly (na die orkeshak?) is sprekend van
die styl, simboliese interpretasie wat sy in haar ontwerpe gevolg het.
Die Technikon-sangers het almal beïndruk, veral Johan Botha met
sy trefflike stemproduksie, en Pierre du Toit en Mari Opperman met goeie
stemverhoogteenwoordigheid. Regisseur Michael Williams het respek
vir die musiek getoon en ruimtes en tydsberekening goed benut.
Maar dit is veral dirigent Neville Dove wat met intelligente
oorwagigheid die opvoering musikaal in toom gehou het. Sy bydrae tot die
opera kan nie geringskat word nie. Die vyf opvoerings kon weliswaar nie
die volle trek nie, maar dit is van minder belang. Dat 'n inheemse opera ná
so lank 'n tyeperk van gesubsidieerde opera tog wel die verhoog haal, is 'n
eerlike gebeurtenis. Miskien 'n wonderwerk ook!

Hofmeyr adds a Gothic touch



Composer Hendrik Hofmeyr, the man responsible for the chamber opera "The Fall of the House of Usher", is in South Africa to see the premiere of the work, and to visit his parents in Cape Town. He returns to Florence in January.

M A FARQUHARSON
Tonight Reporter

WHILE young composer Hendrik Hofmeyr was trying his best to complete a Gothic chamber opera dealing with death and corpses breaking out of their coffins, his Italian landlady was busy smashing windows and making anonymous telephone calls in the middle of the night in an effort to throw him out of his lodgings.

Hofmeyr laughs ruefully: "Italian landlords are notorious."

His Florentine landlady's actions might have added to the atmosphere of his work, which is based on the Edgar Allen Poe story "The Fall of the House of Usher", and which tells of the death of the last surviving members of the old family of the morbid Roderick, who is afflicted with strange fears and fancies, and his sister Madeline.

Madeline dies and is entombed in the old mansion, but then leaves her coffin to claim her brother.

Hofmeyr, who was studying in Florence at the time, eventually finished the work by candlelight — it was cold and wintery at the time — after his landlady had cut off the electricity to his lodgings. "So that might have added the Gothic touch."

Pact, in collaboration with the Pretoria Technikon, will be staging the work, which will be conducted by Neville Dove and directed by Michael Williams, in the Arena at the State Theatre on November 24, 25 and 26 and on November 27.

"Composing is something I've done almost always," Hofmeyr says. He won the Department of National Education's 1986/7 Opera Competition for the initial work he did on "The Fall of the House of Usher".

He decided to use the Poe story because "I suppose I'm fairly gothically inclined by nature".

Also, "opera is essentially dramatic, if not melodramatic", and should deal with extraordinary or supernatural subjects, rather than everyday happenings.

LIKING

The competition set certain limits: for example, there was to be no chorus or dances and only a limited cast — which fitted the tale, and "I've always liked the story very much".

Hofmeyr believes that in general, while Poe is underestimated as a writer in English-speaking countries, he is overestimated in European countries, possibly because his work fares well in translation.

The composer feels Poe's poetry "makes one squirm" but finds "The Fall of the House of Usher" to be one of the writer's best tales.

"It was difficult making the libretto because the language is very rich, almost precious," with the decadence inherent in the story reflected by an overuse of almost archaic language.

In opera, however, one cannot make use of that density of language: "You have to contract and simplify because it's hard in opera to catch the words."

"It's very descriptive music: it's not abstract music. The orchestra underlines the text."

Because he was forced to do the libretto as well as the music, the composer, who was simultaneously trying to deal with his landlady, worked himself into a state over "The Fall of the House of Usher".

EMPATHY

Hofmeyr says he had to try to feel what his neurotic characters felt and then wrote the words applicable to the character: "You have to try to grasp the mentality but from the inside."

The composer finished "The Fall of the House of Usher" about a year and a half ago, and although he was eagerly looking forward to hearing it played by a full orchestra for the first time, he felt there were many changes he would have liked to have made — "one always does".

The composer completed his matric in Cape Town and gained his first stimulus as a composer from a "marvellous teacher" at the school "who pushed me in that direction".

While still a teenager, he started writing, "very badly, but the enthusiasm was there".

He then studied musicology at UCT where yet another teacher gave him further encouragement, and then, seven years ago, he went to Italy where he first studied the piano, then composing and finally conducting.

Once, during the interview, Hofmeyr apologised for speaking slowly and said he was translating everything he said from Italian.

How did he become involved with opera?

Hofmeyr says he had always had "almost Anglo-Saxon scruples about melodrama, about operatic language" so he listened to Mozart, Wagner and Verdi and the composers who worked right at the end of the 19th century.

There was a big gap in the operas he listened to: "What was the lifeblood of opera — the 19th century composers — was what we disdained."

LYRICAL

Although these works can be looked down on from a purely musical point of view, they are "really lyric theatre"; a complete union of all the elements of opera.

From his stay in Florence, Hofmeyr has come to realise that sadly, and contrary to popular belief, Italians, especially the younger generation, are not grand opera lovers.

The composer has found that in South Africa people are still insecure about this art form and therefore work harder to keep it going.

THYS ODENDAAL skryf oor die kunste

'n Gebeurtenis sonder die gala

WAT in Suid-Afrikaans in musiek 'n gebeurtenis behoort te wees, word gewoonlik geïgnoreer. Daarenteen is die land behep met die een gala na die ander. Want sien, 'n spesiale musiekgebeurtenis – soos nou op die vooraand van die première van die Suid-Afrikaanse komponis Hendrik Hofmeyr se opera *The Fall of the House of Usher* – word eenvoudig op die agtergrond geskuif, want nie alleen die publiek nie maar ook die meeste organisasies self vermy dié soort geleentheid soos 'n pes. . .

Een tragiese eienskap van die Suid-Afrikaanse kunstebedryf is dat vernuwing eintlik 'n soort vloek is. Só kan 'n mens wonder hoeveel 'operafanatici' hulle sal verwerdig om *Usher* te besoek, want dié eiesoortige groep mense is so banaal konserwatief en in enge tradisie gebonde dat enigiets buiten 'n hoë C en, o wee, melodie-loos, uit die borse is. En in ieder geval, die kansie vir 'n opskop en optof lyk ook nie te goed in die Arena van die Staatsteater Pretoria nie. Daarvoor is minstens die gloriefeyers van die Opera nodig.

Die dryfkrag agter die voorstelling van dié Hofmeyr-opera in eietydse idioom is die hoof van die Operaskool van die Technikon Pretoria, Emma Renzi, en drie van dié skool se studente neem deel – die sopraan Mari Opperman as Madeline Usher, die tenoor Johan Botha is die Verteller en die bariton Pierre du Toit sing Roderick Usher. Die vierde singende lid is die Truk-tenoor Willie van Staden as die Vriend en die nie-singende bediende word gespeel deur Dewald Norval.

Die jaar 1988 is in die operawêreld opsluit die jaar van Edgar Allan Poe (1809 – 1849) se *The Fall of the House of Usher*, 'n verhaal van bonatuurlike afgryse. Benewens Hofmeyr se bewerking daarvan in Pretoria, het die enigmatiese Amerikaanse komponis Philip Glass se gelyknamige weergawe vroeër vanjaar sy wêreldpremière via die American Repertory Theatre op 18 Mei beleef en is onmiddellik daarna deur die Kentucky Opera op die planke gebring.

Maar lank voor Glass en nou Hofmeyr pen op papier gesit het, is die Franse komponis Debussy reeds getreiter deur dié verhaal van wanhoop. Antoine Goléa skryf die feit dat Debussy nooit dié opera voltooi het nie toe aan 'n 'n soort instink tot selfbehoudenes. Dit is 'n werk wat lei na vernietiging, die dood en leegheid. . . en het Debussy nie self by geleentheid geskryf: "Om 'n werk te voltooi, is dit nie maar min of meer soos die dood van 'n geliefde nie?"

Debussy het in 1908 aan *House of Usher* begin werk, deur 1909 en 1910, dit opsy geskuif vir 'n paar jaar en weer daarna teruggekeer in 1916 en 1917.

Sestig jaar het verloop totdat die Chileense komponis, orrelis en musikoloog Juan Allende-Blin, nou in Duitsland, dit op hom geneem het om die werk te voltooi, ver beter as die poging van die Yale-musikoloog Abbate en Kyr, volgens Harry Halbreich se aantekeninge op die eerste plaatopname wat in 1984 uitgereik is deur EMI.

(Daar moet onthou word dat Poe se werk, aan die hand van vertalings deur die digters Charles Baudelaire en Stéphane Mallarmé, selfs meer gewild was as in sy geboorteland.) Debussy het self die (Franse) teks van sy *House of Usher* geskryf.

In 1976 was net twee stukke van die geheel bekend; 'n enkele bladsy waarop Debussy geskryf het "Wat moontlik die *Prelude* tot *House of Usher* kan wees", en 'n manuskrip van 21 bladsye met die stem- en klavierparty van die volledige eerste toneel en die begin van die tweede. Juan Allende-Blin het daarna baie ander dokumente opgespoor, Debussy se teks gerangskik, die musiek hersien en die karige orkestrasie-aanduidinge tot 'n vol opera uitgebou, net korter as 'n uur.

Debussy se *The Fall of the House of Usher* is vir die eerste keer op 1 Desember 1977 in Frankfurt met Eliahu Inbal as dirigent uitgevoer – as 'n radio-uitsending.

Soos Debussy gebruik Hofmeyr sy twaalfman-kamerorkes om die onheilspellende 'doodshuis' te skets en die karakters te bepaal. Met die hywoon van repetisies het 'n mens die gevoel gekry van 'n intens-dramatiese werk. Daar is tog 'n verskil in hul gebruik van die onderskeie karakters. Beide volstaan met Roderick Usher, vir Debussy 'n bariton en Hofmeyr verkies 'n donkerder bas-bariton; vir albei is Madeline Usher 'n sopraan. Debussy se Vriend is 'n bas-bariton, terwyl Hofmeyr daar die tenoorstem inspan. Benewens dié drie karakters het Debussy op 'n Dokter (bariton) besluit, maar Hofmeyr het ook 'n tenoor-Verteller en 'n Bediende wat g'n woord sing of praat nie. Sy Bediende is min of meer so misterieus en dramaties fassinerend soos Menotti se Tobie in *Die medium*. Bloot op dié gegewe geoordeel, is dit duidelik dat Hofmeyr 'n groter kontras en ryker verskeidenheid op sy verhoog het as sy beroemde Franse voorganger.

Ten slotte net 'n woord van dank (des roepende in die woestyn, weliswaar) aan die Technikon Pretoria se Operaskool, 'n opvoedkundige instelling wat om allerlei redes geldelik ingeperk word sodat dosente en musici moet padgee. Dit is die enigste instansie in Transvaal wat eietydse Suid-Afrikaanse opera as 't ware warm uit die oond, á la toneel, op die planke bring; soos Jacobus Swart se baie verdienstelike *Of-fergang* met die komponis self in die Aula-orkesbak so 'n dekade gelede toe Dawie Couzyn nog hoof daar was. En nou, met behulp van Truk en 'n gesonde borgskap van die departement van Nasionale Opvoeding, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, weer net in Pretoria; met die progressiewe (alternatiewe) Johannesburg vergete en afgeskryf.

Dink net: As elke dekade één Suid-Afrikaanse opera op die planke verseker het, kon ons teen die jaar 2 000 al byna 'n dosyn gehad het. . .



EDGAR ALLAN POE



EMMA RENZI... dryfkrag agter die projek.



PHILIP GLASS... 'n première vroeër vanjaar.

DIE première van sy *The Fall of the House of Usher* kom as 'n gave verjaardaggeskenk, byna op sy verjaardag: Sondag was die Suid-Afrikaanse komponis Hendrik Hofmeyr 31 jaar oud, in Pinelands in Kaapstad gebore op 20 November 1957.

Daar was hy op laer skool en in 1975 het hy aan die Hoërskool Nas-

eintlik by Mozart opgehou. Maar in Italië het hy begin verstaan waarom opera presies gaan, "en hoe baie van die twintigste-eeuse operaniks eintlik met opera te make het nie."

Waarom Edgar Allan Poe se afgryse *House of Usher*?

"Ek is nou in my Gotiese periode. Dis ook seker in reaksie teen die

geskryf, vanweë die aard van die komposisiewedstryd van die Departement van Nasionale Opvoeding. "Ek moes eers 'n aria voorlê en die geraamte van die werk, hoe lank dit sou duur en so meer. Half agterstevoor en onderstebo, soos Verdi en Puccini min of meer geskryf het. Daarna moes ek die begin van al die arias voorlê; toe

net één van die baie konsepte binne 'n enkele werk oor te dra. As al die elemente in 'n opera saamwerk, kan jy dalk net-net daarin slaag om 'n een aspek behoorlik te belig. Almal gemoed met die produksie moet na daardie een mikpunt streef, of dit val uitmekaar.

"Ek hou nie van produksies wat iets probeer

kunsvorm. As regisseurs die genre minag, weerhou hulle die musikale drama van hul gehore.

"Ek het dit nie teen vernuwing in produksie nie, maar die regisseur wat binne opera-konteks nie meer oorspronklik kan werk nie is die man wat hom beroeë op foefies. Dis ondraaglik.

"Op die oomblik wil ek 'n ballet skryf want

Om opera as opera te behou

sau gematrikuleer. Hy verwys na die Skorpionite en bevestig 'n soort rebelseid, 'n radikalisme, 'n afkeer aan voorkeure.

Ná skool is hy Ikeys toe. Eers vier jaar vir sy graad en toe anderhalfjaar vir 'n meestersgraad, van 1976 tot 1981. Dit was middel-1981 dat hy die Kaap gegroet het, Florence toe waar hy, ook maar arm en vervreem, gelukkig sy landgenoot Arnold Bosman kon uitsoek. In Florence het hy aan die Cherubini-Konservatorium ingeskryf, maar vir komposisie moes hy Bologna toe, een keer per week by Ivan Vidor, 'n Hongaarse komponis en musikoloog wat in Italië woon.

"Baie avant-garde, se Hofmeyr, "en die teenoorgestelde van wat ek is, maar hy dwing homself nie op nie. Hy skryf heeltemal gevorderd atonaal.

"Maar die sterkste invloed op my is Simanofski, die mees subtiel orkestreerder van die eeu. Ook Benjamin Britten, hy en Simanofski was die grootste invloede. "Britten skryf in eenvoud, regstreeks. Seker weens Simanofski se invloed, is my musiek meer versteur."

Hofmeyr vertel dat toe hy in Suid-Afrika was hy niks eintlik in Italiaanse opera belang gestel het nie, "of negentiende-eeuse opera, behalwe Wagner, nie."

Opera het toe vir hom



land waar ek nou woon, 'n land vol passie, maar nie innerlik nie; na buite. Ek dink dis my aard. Ek staan altyd in teenreaksie t.o.v. my omgewing. As ek in Duitsland gewoon het, sou ek waarskynlik meer Italiaans geskryf het.

"Ek voel ook dat opera nie eintlik die regte medium vir 'sit-com' is nie. Ek hou nie van gesprek dit vir die sang-stem aanpas. Dis moeilik. Die goeie librettis is bitter skaars. Min verstaan die opera-medium werklik."

House of Usher is oor 'n lang tydperk sporadies

besluit ek maar op 'n arioso vir elke karakterpleks van 'n vol aria. Ek het later ook aan die opera verander, byvoorbeeld die Madeline-aria verleng, want die arme vrou sing niks anders nie.

"Ek skryf volgens die visuele beeld, maar eintlik meer na die stemmingsgevoel, die gegewe. Ek glo in die Volledige Kuns.

"Daar moet in enige opera 'n fokuspunt wees. Dit is moeilik om aan iemand wat glad nie vertrou is met die opera nie

Die Kaapstadse komponis Hendrik Hofmeyr se eenbedryf-opera *The Fall of the House of Usher* beleef vanaand sy première in die Staatsteater Pretoria, 'n voorstelling deur die Technikon Pretoria en Truk-Opera. Hofmeyr, wat die afgelope sewe jaar in Italië woon, het na sy geboorteland teruggekeer om die historiese geleentheid by te woon, die eerste opera deur 'n Suid-Afrikaner wat deur 'n streekraad opgevoer word ná die totstandkoming van die kunsterade 'n kwartee gelede. THYS O'DENDAAL het met die komponis gesels.

sé wat nie in die teks of die musiek staan nie. Baie regisseurs wil deesdae altyd buite daardie komponis-raamwerk peuter. Maar wat beteken dit? Dat hulle eintlik nie in die kunsvorm glo nie. Opera is sang en drama. Die regisseur moet dit voor oë hou. Deesdae is regisseurs vol truuks. As opera vandag sinryk aangebied word; soos die komponiste bedoel het, is dit net so aangrypend soos eertyds. As die regisseur hom van die komponis distansieer, vervreem hy ook sy gehoor. Opera is 'n ontroerende

daar is 'n moontlikheid om dit in Italië opgevoer te kry. Ek brand om nog 'n opera te skryf, en het iets soos Leipoldt se *Die heks* in gedagte."

operas nie. Opera, uit die aard van die kunsvorm, moet oor die bonatuurlike gaan. Dis 'n aftakeling van opera om oor huishoudelike dinge te skryf, soos so baie hedendaagse komponiste. Die deklamatoriese styl geval my nie. Dis opera sonder lewensbloed.

"Ek skryf opera vir sangers. Die ander aspekte is uiters belangrik, maar die sang is heel bo-aan. Die orkes moet op sy eie kan staan, maar behoort nooit 'n plaasvervanger te wees vir die sang nie. Die orkes moet struktureel sterk wees ja, maar as 'n raamwerk vir die vokale lyn."

In 1985 het Hofmeyr, à la Bartok, sy eie *Bloubaard*-opera geskryf. "Die libretto het lank geneem, want ek het maar min Italiaans gepraat in daardie stadium."

Toe het hy op Engels besluit vir sy volgende opera. "Poe moet 'n mens in ieder geval in Engels doen, niks anders nie. Sy taalgebruik is eiesoortig en eksentriek. Jy moet dit behou."

Nie dat hy daarvan hou om libretto te skryf nie. "Ek soek graag my eie onderwerp, lees baie, geniet poësie. Maar ek is geen letterkundige nie. Om 'n libretto te skryf, is baie tydrowend. Prosa kan jy nie net so vir die stem behou nie. Jy moet

Beeld
24 November 1988

Hofmeyr's horror lingers on

Betsie Smith

IN ONE of the short stories related before the performance of "The Fall of the House of Usher" Edgar Allan Poe declared that madness is an over-acuteness of the senses.

During the opera one wondered whether the author would not then approve of this adaptation of his short story for being one that makes the audience "mad" for 50 minutes. For the spectators' senses are sensitised to the utmost. One is acutely aware of what goes on and remains aware of the feeling of what went on long after the last notes have faded.

Experiencing this opera convinced me that liking something is not a prerequisite for appreciating the genius of its creator. I did not leave the theatre humming a beautiful new tune; what did linger on was an uneasy feeling of horror, the opera being about the hidden world of phantoms.

The evening started with an excellent reading/monologue by Drummond Marais of two Poe short stories, namely "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat".

This set the scene for the world premiere of Hendrik Hofmeyr's operatic version of an equally horrific Poe story. I found this opera to continue the ideals of Wagner's *gesamtkunstwerk* and Britten's chamber operas. Hofmeyr (and all who worked with him)

Opera: The Fall of the House of Usher
Cast: Johan Botha, Willie van Staden,
Pierre du Toit, Mari Opperman,
Dewald Norval, Drummond Marais
Composer: Hendrik Hofmeyr
Director: Michael Williams
Conductor: Neville Dove
Venue: Arena, State

achieved a satisfying integration of content, dramatic adaptation, musical interpretation, clever production and direction, and proper performance. An admirable effort.

The only aspect that came between the opera's performance and the listener's understanding (thus obstructing communication) was poor diction by Opperman and Van Staden in particular. Luckily the meaning of their words was indicated by the music, direction and lighting. Otherwise, the four young singers and one non-singing cameo performer did a laudable job.

All persons and organisations (the Department of National Education, the Technikon Pretoria, Pact, Neville Dove and his orchestra, etc) must receive all possible credit.

Just one last remark: why not commission that South African-based oratorio Hofmeyr so desperately wants to compose?

● Last performance at 3 pm today.

The Star Tonight
28 November 1988

Hofmeyr achieves a lot with little

For those who are still relatively uninitiated in the world of things macabre, ugly and the dark forces of the supernatural, Hendrik Hofmeyr's opera "The Fall of the House of Usher" will definitely prove entertaining.

For more hardened souls, like myself, who have lived through Richard Strauss's "Electra" and have survived the hysterics of "Salome" by the same composer, the opera held just sufficient visual and musical fascination to sustain one through to the end.

But it is utterly unfair to compare this work by the young South African composer to the late Romantic operas of Strauss, or even, in our present day, the neo-romantic large-scale works of Hana-Werner Henze.

Hofmeyr is using a 12-piece orchestra, a small cast and an island on the stage. With those

REVIEW ... by PIETER SMIT

OPERA: The Fall of the House of Usher (State Theatre)

CONDUCTOR: Neville Dove

limited means he achieves a lot.

The orchestration in particular is remarkably effective. It is lush and busy and makes the small body of musicians sound like a full orchestra.

The opera owes its format and also its vocal style to Benjamin Britten's "chamber operas", such as "Billy Budd", or maybe "The Turn of the Screw", even though the latter calls for a much larger ensemble.

The composer can make no claims to addressing the problems of opera, the combination of the visual and the musical, in a new or modern way.

Some gimmicks are thrown in, such as the visual surprise at the end, but mindful of the pressing need for innovation in the operatic genre, the work is merely, as con-

ductor Neville Dove puts it in his assessment in the programme notes, "a microcosm of operatic techniques" and standard techniques, at that.

In Germany, composers such as Maurice Kagel have opened up a whole new world of so-called "music theatre" (not theatre music), giving freer reign to their musical and visual imagination.

The music is indeed very effective, if maybe somewhat too effective accompanimental and atmospheric. The orchestra seldom came to the fore to participate lyrically in the drama. Often the music had the same effect as film music, good film music!

It was heartening to hear a work by a South African composer played well. Neville Dove did a

sterling job as conductor. He held the ensemble together in the most hectic passages and brought out the colours in the score.

Balance between the orchestra and the singers was ideal, most of the time. Pierre du Toit as Roderick Usher was in good voice, although Mari Opperman as Madeline Usher was slightly too soft in the tutti passages.

The opera was last year's winning entry in the Opera Competition organised by the Department of National Education. It was presented by Pact Opera in collaboration with the Pretoria Technikon and is preceded by readings of "The Tell-tale Heart" and "The Black Cat" by Edgar Allan Poe.

The readings by Drummond Marais exhausted both audience and reader, who faltered a number of times. A 40-minute monologue can never be paired off with a 50-minute opera.



Opera's impact reverberates

RIEK VAN RENSBURG

OPERA: "The Fall of the House of Usher"

CAST: Johan Botha, Willie van Staden, Pierre du Toit, Mari Opperman and Chamber Orchestra conducted by Neville Dove

DIRECTOR: Michael Williams

VENUE: Arena, State Theatre

DATE: Thursday November 24

THE score of "The Fall of the House of Usher" as realised in this production, unhesitatingly gripped and spoke for the emotions of the majority of a full-house opening night audience. The libretto is based on Edgar Allen Poe's tale of a family's descent into madness.

Composer Hendrik Hofmeyr's brilliant manipulation of music's acoustic reality emerged as a strong element of his compositional craft in this, his second opera. So, too, did the fact that his effectiveness in sonority is as versatile as it is unflagging, emerge with abundant evidence. He expresses himself in a boundless sound-language ranging from highly glossed polish to jagged, raw edges; from dynamic animation to static sound-pastels and from subtle suggestiveness to vivid exaggeration in this chamber opera in one act, with its Gothic ambience. The air of natural and supernatural intermingled admirably, caught by the careful integration of "exotic" percussion. The opera operates on the level of surface effectiveness, but also sustains a sort of symphonic argument, almost intravenously as well as cerebrally.

Though the director seized on the opera's expressionistic preoccupation with the grotesque, he did not detrimentally exaggerate the work's inherent propensity towards abnormality and hysteria. A certain stiffness of movement and timing, though, settled on the cast. The set was overdressed and cluttered but the lighting plot heightened the drama.

Neville Dove conjured chamber ensemble playing of skill and character from the 12 members of the NO. The instrumental playing in the pitless Arena emerged with sharper focus than did some of the singing. Still, he managed to keep a balance while fostering a responsive sensitivity to detail. He thoroughly revealed the subtlety of musical imagination and resourcefulness of the score. The expressive demands were met in a highly charged performance, combining technical assurance with a spirit of audacity and adventure.

The freshness of voices, the unsophisticated and totally committed approach of the student cast were more moving than any perfection could have achieved. Johan Botha brought a wealth of expressive purpose to almost all his singing as the Narrator, except once when his Helden tenor was submerged by the instrumental texture. Pierre du Toit was dramatically convincing as Roderick Usher. His diction matched Botha's for clarity.

Willie van Staden as the Friend, brought grace and conviction to his role, the firm phrasing of his youthful tenor complementing the lithe vigour of his appearance. Mari Opperman moulded the phrases of Madeleine Usher with musical sensibility even if her light soprano lacked the sustaining power in her aria.

The impact of this performance of "The Fall of the House of Usher" was ineradicable. Opera lovers are indebted to the opera department of the Pretoria Technikon under the inspired leadership of Emma Renzi who, in collaboration with Pact Opera, staged this work.

Transvaler - Applous
01 December 1988

Operageskiedenis in Staatsteater

Opera: The Fall of the House of Usher
Komponis: Hendrik Hofmeyr
Kunstenaars: Johan Botha (Verteller), Pierre du Toit (Usher), Willie van Staden (Vriend) Mari Opperman (Madeline)
Dirigent: Neville Dove
Regisseur: Michael Williams
Plek: Arena, Staatsteater

Henning Viljoen

karakters geplaas ge-
wees het

Pierre du Toit het ten
spyke van die feit dat die
wil ietwat laag is vir
ster. In gestagde vae
gestalting as Usher ge-
lewer.

As die verteller het
Johan Botha weer eens
beïndruk met die goed
gefokuse stemplasing
van sy pragtige wellui-
dende tenoerstem.

Die groot verrassing
van die aanbieding is
egter Willie van Staden.
wat as die Vriend in spel
en sang 'n uiters oortui-
gende karakterisering
daargestel het. Indien
hy homself net kan
speen van sekere vokale
maniërismes en sy stem
vryer projekteer, is hier
'n baie goeie operate-
noor in wording.

Hoewel Mari Opperman vir 'n jong onervare sanger 'n baie verdienstelike vertolking van Madeline gelewer het, sou 'n sanger met 'n sterker stem meer reg aan die rol laat geskied.

Truk en die Operaskool verdien lof vir die grootmoedige bevoordeeling nie net van die uitvoerende operakuns nie, maar ook van die skeppende operakuns. Hopelik is dit die begin van nog vele inheemse opera-aanbiedinge.

van Michael Williams en die ontwerpe van Nadya Cohen — getrou

Die drukkersduivel het Dinsdag amok gemaak in *Applous!* en 'n gedeelte van Henning Viljoen se resensie van *The Fall of the House of Usher* laat verdwyn. Die volledige resensie verskyn vandag.

aan die oordoende troektradisie van Truk — in dié produksie die musikale idioom van die werk besweer eerder as om dit te kompleeteer.

Hier is 'n gulde kans verpas om 'n eksperimentele minimalistiese konsep as vertrekpunt te gebruik, aangesien die musik in eie krag sterk genoeg is sonder om in visuele effekbejag versmoor te word.

Sterker klem kon dan ook op die innerlike psigiese dinamiek van die

DIE première van die belowende jong komponis Hendrik Hofmeyr se *The Fall of the House of Usher*, waarmee hy die Departement van Nasionale Opvoeding se Operawedstryd vir 1986/87 gewen het, verteenwoordig 'n merkwaardige mylpaal in die operageskiedenis van Suid-Afrika.

Hier is 'n kameropera wat in die klein baie geslaag al die dramatiese en musikale elemente van musiekteater tot 'n grootse sintese integreer. Benewens die ryk atmosferiese klankspektrum wat op 'n virtuose wyse deur die twaalf instrumente in die orkes oopgedek word, vorm dit 'n integrale deel van 'n uiters idiomatiese sangpartituur wat soms sterk aan Britten laat dink.

Musikaal was die aanbieding onder die fynsinnige leiding van Neville Dove 'n kragtoer vir orkes en soliste. Ongelukkig het die regie

APPENDIX F

The Orphans of Qumbu

- Bekoorlike opera oor en vir Suid Afrika: 'die weeskinders van Qumbu'. 1995. *Die Volksblad*: July 1995. (electronic access: 3 Musicals for young people CDROM)
- Ronge, B. 1993. A musical signpost, *The Sunday Times*: July 3. (electronic access: 3 Musicals for young people CDROM)
- Rutter, K. 1997. Stimulating schools tour opera, *The Cape Times*: March 1997. (electronic access: 3 Musicals for young people CDROM)

Who Killed Jimmy Valentine?

- Cromhout, J. 1999. Musical whodunit a hit with students, *District Mail*: June 18. (electronic access: 3 Musicals for young people CDROM)
- Wasserman, H. 1995. A Musical that is jiving and jolly, my bra! *The Cape Times*: August 10. (electronic access: 3 Musicals for young people CDROM)
- Whitebooi, M. 1995. A joyful piece full of life, *Die Burger*: August 13. (electronic access: 3 Musicals for young people CDROM)

Wonderfully Wicked

- Van der Merwe. 2005. Leerders sterre in musiekspel, *Die Burger*: 14, July 23.
- Wonderful school fun – Fiona Chisholm. Critic's Corner. (online). Available: <http://www.capetownopera.co.za/htm/article.php?id=302&orgid=15>. 2005/08/24

A MUSICAL SIGNPOST

Barry Ronge – Sunday Times, Johannesburg, July 3, 1993

The Orphans of Qumbu ends with an ecstatic chorus of the lines “Peace is coming, coming soon” and it is one of the few occasions so far in this Standard Bank National Arts Festival where I have heard such words and believed them.

This energetic music table is the latest of the progressive works composed and directed by Michael Williams whose artistic goal seems to be the creation of a uniquely African opera form. Thus we have highly skilled opera singers interacting with choirs of traditional singers switching styles and techniques to the accompaniment of a piano and a skillfully deployed mass of African percussion instruments.

It is a wonderfully inventive musical statement which creatively uses the best performance elements of both styles in a striking synthesis. His plot negotiates a similarly fine line between magic realism and political satire. The plot, a little too literal perhaps, is saved by the music and the exceptionally fine performances which combine broad seriousness and lyrical intensity to great effect.

Williams is a better composer than he is a storyteller, and one can only imagine how wonderful his work will be when he finds a librettist who can express his musical ideas in words of matching beauty. But we must give the man time. This is only the fourth of these works he has created and each one has been a great leap forward. This one is a joyous affair, positive, creative and full of musical power, a significant signpost on the road ahead for music theatre in the country.

Stimulating schools tour opera

Karen Rutter, Cape Times, March 1997

If ever there was an award made for effort, then those involved in the schools tour of *The Orphans of Qumbu* deserves to win. The logistics involved in mounting a traveling musical with a rotating chorus are daunting and obviously much backstage preparation was put into this project before the actual tour began. Judging by the “opening” performance at the Mary Attlee Centre in Retreat, the hard work has paid off. *The Orphans of Qumbu* is a short musical which combines a cast of soloists and a chorus of children. Cape Town Opera’s method was to make use of choirs from each of the schools where the musical will be staged – thus the version I saw featured the St Mary’s Primary School Choir, while other versions will include Fezeka High, Heathfield High, Khulani High and other pupils. The students are trained by their music teachers before director Kim Gunning amalgamates them into actual production.

The script calls for a large group of children to play the orphans of the title, a collection of “lost” souls whom according to the story, are forced to work in the fields of Qumbu by the townsfolk who live in town. Apart from singing, their contribution consists of

carefully choreographed ensemble work, which brings a lot of colour and action to the stage, an effect which is nicely counter-balanced by the solo roles of the rest of the cast.

The St Mary's pupils acquitted themselves superbly, never faltering and rising enthusiastically to the task at hand. Equally adept were the soloists all of who turned in convincing character sketches according to their roles within the plot. The score is bright and accessible, which is entirely appropriate to the participative nature of the production.. As a means to expose audiences, particularly younger ones, to the often-intimidating genre of music-theatre, *The Orphans of Qumbu* succeeds completely. And as a method of actively involving children in the production process, Cape Town Opera's approach – together with those teachers, trainers and musicians involved – cannot be faulted.

Just watching the delighted faces of the St Mary's choir (and their families), one can honestly say that the performance of *The Orphans of Qumbu* is a stimulating, uplifting experience which gives one hope for the progressive future of the arts in this country.

Bekoorlike opera oor en vir Suid-Afrika

Die Weeskinders van Qumbu – Die Volksblad, 21 Julie 1995

Om politieke retoriek te gebruik : 'n stap in die regte rigting. Dit is nou Williams se geesteskind – 'n opera oor en vir Afrika, spesifiek Suid-Afrika. Die aanbieding is 'n bekoorlike mengsel van uiters toeganklike melodieë, knap musiekleiding en humoristiese regie wat die deelnemers se beperkte ervaring in gedagte hou en dit tog verbreed, en geesdriftige deelname deur 'n ywerige span sangers.

Ek het doelbewus nie die opsomming van die verhaal gelees nie, net om te sien of ek kon volg wat aangebied word. Die basiese intrige was duidelik, maar liriek gaan tog verlore deur soms onduidelike diksie en veral tromspel wat die stemme verdoesel.

Van die soliste ghet Tania Bekker as Riets baie goeie werk gelewer met suiwer sang, goeie diksie en natuurlike spel; Theuns Volschenk se sang as die koster was kragtig en opwindend; terwyl die skraal Yorgen Molisa heerlik lewe gegee het aan die polisieman se lied, bygestaan deur 'n vrolike ensemble. Terloops, Molisa se duidelike diksie het getoon hoeveel meer plesier 'n mens uit die werk put as jy weet waaroor gesing word.'n Mens het begrip daarvoor dat die aanbieding koorlede 'n kans gegee het om revaring in solo-rolle te kry. In die geheel het dit heel goed gegaan.

Solo-sang vereis egter 'n kragtiger karakterisering in soel, maar ook in stem. Die simpatieke, doelgerigte begeleiding van Dounin het opgeval, terwyl die perkussiespel van Heinrich Kruse en sy enkele helpers 'n kleurrike bydrae was. Dit is 'n bekoorlike werk vol sjarme en humor wat verklaar hoekom dit al soveel keer opgevoer is. En, aan die einde van die dag, is daardie vermaaklike leerproses vier deelnemers en gehoor. 'n Mens hoop net duie gehore word nog groter.

Musical whodunnit a hit with students

Josh Cromhout – District Mail, 18 June 1999

Hottentots Holland High School, June 1999, Somerset West.

Director Johan Laten, Musical Director Cor Ellis-Gardiner, Students of Hottentots Holland High School.

The laid-back detective who always gets his man and whodunit mystery genre has been around for a long time in book and movie form and, more recently, on our television screens. It seems that everyone loves a good detective story with the ingredients of a murder, a love triangle, a twist in the tale, a bit of action and in the end the killer caught and justice served. *Who killed Jimmy Valentine?* by Michael Williams and Allan Stephenson provides all of the above and a lot more beside. It's a fast moving, lively musical with a singing detective who investigates the murder of a talented young musician/singer. The case is complicated by an on-going feud between two rival taxi families, the Valentines and Tetwas, who are in a bitter war for routes and fares. As detective Mulligan investigates, he collects a string of colourful suspects who all have a motive to kill Jimmy Valentine. To reveal any more of this tightly created plot would spoil the fun. And what fun it is! The cast of young students from Hottentots Holland High School sang their hearts out, danced up a storm and delivered the goods. The music, which uses a variety of established styles, is particularly catchy and I left humming some of the tunes from the show. Stephenson and Williams have blended the best traditions of musical-theatre and created rousing ensembles, solo songs, two heart-breaking duets and, after a few minutes, one's ear adjusts to the fact that everything is sung from start to finish. What an accomplishment for the music staff who deserves a bouquet of flowers for the work they did with these young voices! Johan Laten did a fine job of co-ordinating his forces and the evening never lacked pace, moving from a nail-biting climax to a fitting denouement with professional ease. The dance numbers were a little ragged and could have done with a choreographer, but this is a small quibble in what was a great evening's entertainment. What began as a chore for this reviewer ended up being a stimulating, thoroughly enjoyable evening at the theatre!

A Musical that's jiving and jolly, my bra !

Herman Wasserman – Cape Times, 10 August 1995

Who killed Jimmy Valentine? Written and directed by Michael Williams. With students from the Musicactive Programme. Music by Allan Stephenson. Choreography by Jacky Job. Baxter Theatre.\

They are young and feisty, do their thing with stars in their eyes, and dance and jive with sheer adolescent pleasure. In this bright, fast-moving production high school pupils from all over the Western Cape tell the contentious story of a victim of taxi-violence, a young man who grew up on the far and desolate Cape Flats, who had fun and died young.

With song and dance and lots of enthusiasm the story is told of how the detective (Jean-Pierre van der Spuy) solves the case of the murder of Jimmy Valentine (Keeno-Lee Hector). The soloists move through the pulsating world of night-clubs, talent competitions, teen romances and bumpy taxi-rides.

It is a musical true to the genre known to attract full houses in Cape Town – scant dialogue, a choreographic spectacular and light accessible music.

The young stars entertain spontaneously with their street-wise attitudes of the soloists were especially surprising, with their supple voices and strong projection.

Cecilia Goncalves (in the role of Jimmy's girlfriend, Nomsa), Jean-Pierre van der Spuy (as the detective), Keeno-Lee Hector (Jimmy Valentine) and Loretta Engelbrecht (as Jimmy's mother) are worth keeping a close eye on – with a little more training and exposure they will surely be able to build well-known names for themselves.

The lively dance numbers were impressive. With satin smooth skill the whole cast shifted this way and that across the stage and the well-choreographed dance movements contributed greatly to the atmosphere of the production – vibrating with foot-loose energy and 'joie de vivre'.

Who killed Jimmy Valentine? is encouraging proof that young talent can indeed through hard work be honed to a showy success. Make more music like that and give to your heart's content.

A JOYFUL PIECE FULL OF LIFE...

Melvin Whitebooi – Die Burger, 13 August 1995

Who killed Jimmy Valentine? Written and directed by Michael Williams, With students from the Musicactive Programme. Music by Allan Stephenson. Choreography by Jacky Job. Baxter Theatre.

This certainly is a lively whodunit! It's clear that the pupils taking part in this musical had been trained for weeks. On opening night everything went smoothly, which says a lot, because even with professionals the nerves tend to be raw on the first big night.

Michael Williams' story line is simple: a taxi-war threatens to explode between two opposing taxi-owners, and then someone murders Jimmy Valentine, the son of one of the taxi-owners. Simple? No, suddenly not any more because now it transpires that more than one person was out to get Jimmy. The dialogue is scant with song and dance in abundance. In places the story is told through flashbacks.

The story is set in a dangerous world where taxi-violence is rife (realistically portrayed), a world of talent competitions, love, jealousy...and, alas, like in all love stories, the wrong two people fall in love. In this case the modern day Romeo and Juliet are Jimmy Valentine (played by Keeno-Lee Hector) and Nomsa Tetwa (Cecilia Goncalves). Their parents are both taxi-owners and they hate one another. Jimmy's

father throws him out of the house when he finds out about Jimmy's relationship with Nomsis.

The goal of the Musicactive Programme is to identify young talent and to work with young singers. Cecilia Goncalves has lots of potential, with an extraordinary voice and style.

Others that bear watching are Jean-Pierre van der Spuy, the a la Columbo detective who has to follow every lead relentlessly, He also excels in one of the dance scenes as one of the Starlight Dancers, Keeno-Lee Hector has loads of natural talent. One could have sworn that the piece, and especially the role of Jimmy Valentine, were written with only him in mind. Odidi Mfenyana and Granville Meyer as the two delightful MC's attracted their due attention.

Michael Williams is on record, saying that he would like to do the piece again next year with a professional cast.

Should he do that, he will have to slow it down, since few adult actors will be able to play with as much energy as the young people displayed

Although the cast is rather large (32 players) the dance sequences were done with astounding skill. Even difficult movements were done so smoothly that the audience applauded after nearly every single sequence and song. Cape Town loves this kind of musical – as *Poison* also proved – and *Jimmy Valentine* should attract full houses. This musical is foot-loose and full of life, with pulsating rhythm and lights that remind strongly of the Cape Town night clubs, but added to this, the piece has soul as well. Go by all means and enjoy a vibrant musical that doesn't attempt to add a sermon to the fun.

Leerders sterre in musiekspel

KOBUS VAN DER MERWE

MUSIEKBLYSPEL: *Wonderfully Wicked*, met musiek van Allan Stephenson. Teks en regie: Michael Williams. Met leerders van die Hoërskool Hottentots-Holland (HHH), met die samewerking van Kaapstad Opera (KO) en Kunste-kaap. In die HHH, Somerset-Wes. Nog vandag om 19:30.

DIÉ "musikale romantiese komedie" vertel die storie van Tertius "Twostep" Viljoen (Jantus Philaretou), wat op 22 jaar besluit om sy dansloopbaan prys te gee en terug te gaan skool toe om sy matrieksertifikaat te verwerf.

Maar dinge raak ingewikkeld wanneer Tertius verlief raak op die jong biologie-onderwyseres Alison (Kristie de Klerk). Wanneer die rugby-afrigter Claasen (Ralph Rudd) hulle een middag ná skool in 'n romantiese omhelsing betrap, is Tertius se skoolloopbaan in die gedrang. Met skreeusnaakse gevolge moet Tertius se kostelike vriend Marvin (Kyle Seconna) hom as sy ma voordoen om die situasie te probeer ontloot.

Boonop is alle hoop op Tertius gevestig om die skool se eerste rugbyspan van chroniese verloor te genees.

Die teks is geskryf deur die regisseur en KO-hoofbestuurder (en oudleerling) Michael Williams ter viering van die HHH se 75ste bestaansjaar.

Met vlynskerp innuendo en tipies Kaapse omgangstaal sorg Williams vir besonder komiese vermaak.

Die musiek, geskryf deur die Kaapse komponis Allan Stephenson, is 'n vermening van op en wakker jazz-melodieë en verleidelike tango-ritmes.

Onder leiding van Alexander Fokkens vleg die dinamiese orkes sonder inspanning deur die uiteenlopende begeleidende party, wat wissel van swing en jazz-rock tot meer tipiese blyspel-ballades.

Maar vergeet Andrew Lloyd Webber; hierdie opwindende musiek klink eerder soos 'n eksentrieke Woody Allen-klankbaan wat deur Astor Piazzolla gekomponeer is.

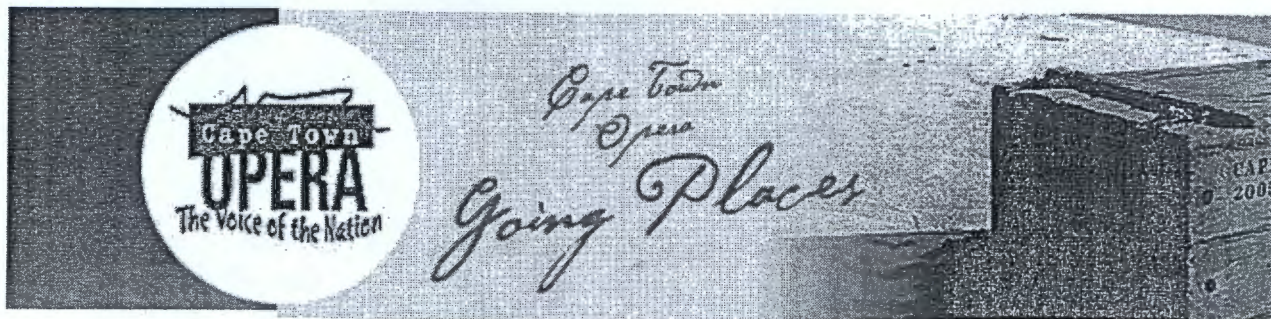
Ingewikkelde gesinkopeerde ritmes, chromatiese melodieë en groot spronge in register – veral in die resitatiewe – maak ook die sang werklik veeleisend. Maar die leerders kwyt hulle uitstekend van hul taak.

Mandy Henriques as Jessie, die hoofseun se vriendin, verdien uitsondering vir haar pragtige vertolking van die bekoorlike ballade "Can We be Sure this is Love?" Haar soepel stem en sagte vibrato maak dit moeilik om te glo dat sy nog op skool is.

Bronwyn Peterson as Jasmina die koffiedame, asook Anne Walsh en Bob Connell van KO as onderwysers is ewe indrukwekkende sangers.

Maar die sterre van die aand is sonder twyfel die leerders van die HHH.

Wonderfully Wicked is 'n uitmuntende produksie.


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Critic's Corner

Wonderful school fun

Cape Town Opera's general manager Michael Williams and noted Cape Town composer Allan Stephenson have done a remarkable job in creating a brand new romantic musical comedy, which was given its premiere at the Hottentots Holland High School in Somerset West on Thursday night July 21.

Written in celebration of the school's 75th birthday and mounted in partnership with Cape Town Opera and Artscape as part of its "Adopt-a-School" programme, "Wonderfully Wicked" has all the ingredients to be successfully taken up and performed by other schools around the country.

The story line about love and life in Shady Side High is particularly apt for a school event to involve learners, educators and parents, but touching on issues like boyfriend-girlfriend jealousies, matric dances, big rugby matches, teachers pleasant and unpleasant, and ballroom dancing, the material strikes a chord with everyone who ever went to school.

One of the highpoints was the scene where Tertius "Twostep" Viljoen (Jantus Philaretou), an adult and avid ballroom dancer who is passing himself off as a schoolboy again, teaches his classmates to dance. Boys and girls team up with their partners and go through a whole variety of dances on stage. They end up, as we all did "in our day" dancing the romantic waltz, the dance of love.

The six-piece band of top class professional musicians, energetically conducted by Alexander Fokkens, is outstanding. The versatile Stephenson has given them great music to play.

It's bright, accessible, foot-tapping stuff and always appropriate to the mood. Be it big choral numbers like "Glory Days", "Peer Pressure" and the "Rugby Cantata" for the whole cast of 80 learners, to a tender love song such as "Can we be sure this is love?". This was performed by Hannu Ehlers as Rob and the sweet voiced Mandy Henriques as Jessie.

In general solo singing is the Achilles Heel of this production. Pitch and projection are a weakness among most of the leads although they have received vocal coaching by Artscape professionals. But it takes time and experience to develop a singing technique.

Michael Williams, who directed as well as wrote the book and lyrics, met the challenge of directing a huge cast on a tiny school hall stage. The action flowed easily. The big crowd scenes were spectacular. Comedy was provided by the two "moffies" Marvin (Kyle Seconna) and Martin (Horaycio Williams).

The latter was hilarious when he pretended to be Two-Step's mother to plead his case with Principal Baxter (Basil Pattison-Bacon) when her "son" landed in trouble for kissing the biology teacher Alison (Kristie de Klerk).

Steve Roux, the real headmaster of HHH, sportingly also made a brief appearance on stage as the Inspector and joined the whole cast at the matric dance grand finale of "Wonderfully Wicked Reprise".

He must have been a proud man. He'd seen his school rise to the occasion for this 75th joyful birthday production and, as an educator, he could appreciate just what an important learning curve it had been for all those involved.

Fiona Chisholm

APPENDIX G

- Apthorp, S. 2004. Cry Freedom - in c-minor please, *Financial Times Magazine*. 36/37. (See appendix G: 1-2)
- Chisholm, F. 2004. Over the rainbow, *Opera Now*. 19. (See appendix G: 4)
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CRY FREEDOM - IN C-MINOR PLEASE

Once a bastion of white South Africa, Cape Town Opera is unearthing talent in the city's townships

Shirley Apthorp

Barcelona-born Daniel Mestre is a long way from home, coaching a group of young singers in a far-off land to perform the choruses in Verdi's opera *La Traviata*. Though the art form and the language are profoundly foreign, in just three months the chorus, singing in flawless Italian, is producing a rich, full-bodied sound. The atmosphere is one of rapt attention.

"*Che questo?*" - "What's the matter?" Mestre translates, setting the scene. "You are at a party, and Violetta is not well. She is sick. She has... she has..." He searches for the English term. "Aids?" offers a soprano, innocently. Nobody laughs, for this is South Africa and it isn't difficult for the opera to feel topical here. Last month the company, Cape Town Opera, staged Beethoven's *Fidelio* - the story of an unjustly detained political prisoner - on Robben Island, Nelson Mandela's jail. It was filmed and will be broadcast on television tomorrow night as part of the 10th anniversary celebrations of the country's first democratic elections, which reach a climax on Tuesday, Freedom Day.

How could opera, an art form associated with white elitism under apartheid, have come to be a fitting celebration for a free, non-racial South Africa? When the home of opera in Cape Town, the Nico Malan theatre, opened in 1971, it was to whites only. Embarrassed liberals organised a boycott. Then the theatre said "coloureds" (apartheid's classification for people of mixed race) could come on Tuesday nights. It was years before mixed audiences were permitted, but the freedom was theoretical. Opera remained a white pastime, funded by a government that deemed it unnecessary to provide black townships with water or electricity.

Times have changed. When Beethoven's prisoners are released for the final scene of *Fidelio*, the mostly black chorus breaks into the *toi-toi*, the protest dance of the anti-apartheid struggle, as the South African flag is unfurled. Nelson Mandela's

voice - from a recorded speech - echoes through the prison courtyard: "Our daily deeds as ordinary South Africans must produce an actual South African reality that will reinforce humanity's belief in justice, strengthen its confidence in the nobility of the human soul and sustain all our hopes for a glorious life for all."

Mthunzi Mbombela, a tenor with Cape Town Opera's vocal ensemble, sings the role of First Prisoner in *Fidelio*.

"It's a cry for freedom," he says. "History repeats itself. These things were happening in Beethoven's time, and they happened here in South Africa. It's relevant. You have to understand these things before you can perform them on stage," he says.

"There is a vibe around opera. The kids who sing opera get a lot of respect from their peers"

A tour of the former prison, including a visit to Mandela's cell, has made a profound impression on the young tenor. "You have to know what it is to be a prisoner. When I was growing up, we heard terrible stories about this place. The first time I saw Mandela's face was in 1990. Before that you could be detained for having a photo of him in your house. When I heard today about the things that used to happen here, I felt like screaming, but Nelson Mandela would smile and say, 'reconciliation'. *Fidelio* is an opportunity to forgive and reconcile."

Mbombela was one of the first black singers to join Cape Town Opera. In 1994, the company decided to stage an African opera. *Enoch, Prophet of God* required an all-black cast and chorus, and artistic director Angelo Gobbato founded the choral training programme to provide it.

"I was living in a township near Port Elizabeth at the time," recalls Mbombela. "I sang in a choir, but I knew nothing

about opera. I was surprised when somebody told me that my voice had the right tone for opera, and that I should audition for the choral training programme. They took me to the hall. I didn't even have music with me. They said I could sing anything I wanted, so I sang something from Handel's *Messiah*, and they invited me to Cape Town. I'd seen people like Pavarotti and Domingo on TV, but I didn't know what they were doing. I thought they went home and sang in their choirs."

Along with 23 peers, Mbombela was trained in note-reading, stagecraft, voice production, French, Italian and German. Mbombela joined the company's Opera Studio, took a diploma in opera at the University of Cape Town, and is now a member of the full-time vocal ensemble. He dreams of a career overseas.

Mestre is the chorus master of the choral training programme, and is full of praise: "The talent is extraordinary," he says. "They come here at the age of 16 or 17, without training, with incredible natural solo voices. You don't find anything like it anywhere else in the world. Each year we hold auditions for 24 new places, and the only hard part is choosing. There's a tenor crisis in Europe, but here we often have a choice of 50 excellent tenors, and we can only take 10."

Down the hallway, a group of township schoolchildren has been bussed in by their teacher, Phumelele Tsewu, for a session with a vocal coach. In their scuffed shoes and patched uniforms, it's clear they have few material assets, but many do have thrilling voices. A 17-year-old boy sings Ottavio's "Il mio tesoro" from *Don Giovanni* with tender insight. "It's about a man who is trying to comfort the girl he's in a relationship with," he explains. "Her father is killed, so she wants revenge. He wants to convince her not to solve the problem by causing another. It's better to find other ways of dealing with crime."

There's that topicality again.

"Opera is important for South Africa," the boy asserts. "Opera brings harmony. When someone sings opera, they can



Symbolic gesture: Beethoven's *Fidelio* – the story of an unjustly detained prisoner – was performed at Cape Town's Robben Island prison to honour Freedom Da

make you cry, if they are convincing. You can't say that for rock music." An 18-year-old baritone, who has just given a creditable rendition of *Don Giovanni's* "La ci darem la mano", chips in: "What I have heard about opera," he says, "is that you can steal a woman's heart." Indeed, a teenaged Zerlina is clinging to his hand.

Tsewu is one of scores of volunteer choir conductors in the townships. At his high school in Guguletu, one of Cape Town's most deprived townships, 92 children sing in the choir, which involves two-hour rehearsals after school, five days a week. Discipline is strict, and standards are high. Choir competitions are as popular as football. "In the townships we have a lot of Pavarottis-in-the-making," says Tsewu. "There is a vibe around opera. You can sing or play an aria, and in most cases you'll find that a person knows where it comes from, and who wrote it. Before it was only for the rich. But that has changed. The kids come to centres like this and see people they can identify with performing. The kids who sing opera get a lot of respect from their peers."

It sounds too good to be true, but visiting the townships bears him out. Charles Banjatwa, who has played a pivotal role in Cape Town Opera's projects by liaising with township choirs, leads the way on a

visit to one school after another, and, as night falls, to adult choirs rehearsing in church halls and schools. I visit Sithembele Matiso High School, where Dumile Prinze's choir crowds into a bare concrete classroom. A girl bring a chair for the visitor. "I used to hate opera," she says, "but now I love it. We went to a performance of *Così fan Tutte* in Cape Town. It was fantastic!"

If her school choir wins the next competition they will travel to Johannesburg. With the aid of a tiny harmonica keyboard, they rehearse songs in several languages. Harmonica keyboards are cheap and easy to use, but they only give starting notes, and do not hold a choir at a constant pitch the way a piano or orchestra would. The pitch values and intonation of the traditional African scale differs from western counterparts but, according to chorus master Mestre, it is only a matter of weeks before young singers adapt to the precise demands of operatic intonation.

Banjatwa also organises workshops for choir conductors. "Last year we had about 20 conductors, this year we have 43 so far," says Banjatwa. "They take what they learn straight back to their choirs, and we give the choirs concert dates so that they have goals to keep working on." It works both ways. The conductors also work as

talent scouts for Cape Town Opera, and choral associations provide an information network for the company.

"We've survived a difficult period," says company general manager Michael Williams. "The argument was that opera is Eurocentric, but it's no more so than the soccer ball. It's a global culture to which South Africans can make a contribution. There were times when we didn't know how we were going to pay salaries at the end of the month, but we've come through that and can celebrate 10 years of transformation." But there is still the problem of audience demographics. "We still live with the geography of apartheid," says Williams. "Public transport to the townships stops at 7pm. After that it's not safe to travel. So it's people with cars who come to the opera. And who has cars?"

But tenor Mbombela has hope. "It's changing. Before 1994, you couldn't find black people singing opera in South Africa; now all our black singers are 35 or younger. Opera schools are full of black people. In the high schools, you can feel the interest. It's a matter of education. Who's going to give them the education? It's us – we know where they are, and we've been there. *Fidelio* is only the beginning. Things will continue to change."

Shirley Apthorp is an FT opera critic

African and European operas meld

FIONA CHISHOLM

NO patronising. No compromising. These were the two guidelines for composer Hans Huyssen, 41, during his 10-year, "long, arduous journey" to write an African opera melding Western and African ideas and musical instruments in such a way that both would have equal value and respect.

The result of his ideals in the face of "resistances, prejudices and fears" is his opera *Masque*, to be premiered at the Artscape Theatre on October 28, presented by Cape Town Opera.

It stars the noted baritone Fikile Mvinjelwa as the Griot, a traditional African storyteller. He heads a cast of 10 white and black singers, six dancers from Jazzart Dance Theatre, the 16-piece Cape Philharmonic Chamber Ensemble, a six-piece Early Music group from Innsbruck and the 11-piece Todi Ensemble of traditional African musicians.

All this for only four performances. No wonder Huyssen is hopeful that Capetonians, with their usual reluctance to buy into anything different, will have enough curiosity to come to *Masque*. One attraction will be to see Angelo Gobato in a small supporting role as a policeman.

Hans Huyssen looks far too clear-cut to be an opera composer. More like an IT boffin? Perhaps.

His idea for *Masque* germinated in Germany 10 years ago and has an autobiographical aspect.

"I was born in South Africa into a German-speaking family and always

thought of myself as 'European'.

"So after studying cello and composing at Stellenbosch University, I went to Salzburg in 1986 to study cello and to Munich in 1992 where I had this fateful meeting with Hans Jurgen van Bose. He was the first credible person who put the challenge to me to do what I wanted to do rather than the safe thing. He grabbed me and said 'Go!'"

"Since he was a living example of a teacher who lived by composing, I found the courage to do it.

"After my Master's with him in composition in Munich, I set off on a freelance career but more and more I found myself busy with African music studies in a very inappropriate place.

"Somehow part of my African identity began to creep up and became so important that I felt I had to come back. I felt something was missing and that I could make a more valuable contribution here.

"If you look at South Africa from the outside there are two main streams of cultural perception. Both have very different and opposing mindsets but both are valid.

"The challenge for me was to try to write a work where I could create a forum for both sides to express themselves equally well but without patronising and without compromising. That would be pointless."

In the story the Griot (Mvinjelwa) takes the audience back to the beginning of the world when God made the five elements - stone, iron, fire, water and air - and out of these elements fashioned man.

However, every time man becomes too proud God sent, in succession, the four balancing forces of blindness, sleep, sorrow and death.

The Blind One, the Tired One, the Sad One and Death are on display as African masks in a museum where they are mere objects of artistic and historical value.

To the Griot they are very much alive. So vividly do they stir his imagination that he recollects their history and - by touching them one by one - dispels the curse that has made them lifeless figures.

An unexpected difficulty for Huyssen, who is also the conductor for *Masque*, was to discover that musicians either play traditional African instruments or they read music. "They didn't do both," he said. "Nobody seemed to realise the necessity for training courses so the African musicians could follow a written score in an orchestra pit."

However Huyssen scored a major victory with Mvinjelwa. The turnaround came when Huyssen, instead of accompanying him on the piano, brought in an *uhadi* - a traditional Xhosa bow which you hit with a stick and which has a calabash as a resonating gourd.

"The moment Fikile sung with this *uhadi* everything changed. He has



Phew: Hans Huyssen has walked an arduous journey to write an 'African' opera. He has been encouraging others to take the risk and not to be Western-trained opera singers.

"All these things were obvious to me but to get there has been a long, intense, beautiful and fulfilling road - but tough."

"They have their operatic training but they also have their traditions which they should cherish and trans-

Over the rainbow

By Fiona Chisholm

OPERA is alive and well in South Africa's new political landscape, thanks to a real transformation in attitudes and prejudices that has killed the myth that opera is a 'white, elitist art form'. Other boosts to change include the lifting of the cultural boycott, bringing an influx of international talent to South Africa, and the redrafting of labour laws to allow singers to be paid 'workers'.

In the 1990s when the government's white paper on arts funding appeared, everyone feared the worst. All four of the country's regional arts councils were to be unbundled, and the resulting cuts in funding led to difficult times for actors, dancers, singers, and directors. It was a sink-or-swim situation.

Cape Town Opera, the most productive of the new opera re-groupings, came into existence in 1998 out of Capab Opera. Its long, symbolic swim to Robben Island took 10 years, finally making the crossing on 27 March this year with a benchmark production of Beethoven's 'Freedom opera' *Fidelio*, staged in the courtyard of the maximum-security prison where Nelson Mandela spent 17 of his 27-year sentence.

No other opera performance in Cape Town has attracted such international attention or sponsorship. Even Norwegian Opera (*Fidelio*'s co-producers) and the European Union came to the party. Suddenly ANC members and government officials, who wouldn't normally be seen dead at an opera, found themselves bowled over by this awesome 80-strong Prisoners' Chorus. Almost all the performers were black, singing in German and acting with their hearts and souls.

Angelo Gobbato, CEO of Cape Town Opera, who is also dynamic director of the Opera Department at the University of Cape Town, deserves the credit for this transformation. In 1994 he initiated three training programmes for black singers: 25 chorus members, 23 in a vocal ensemble and 12 individuals who receive two years' coaching in all opera disciplines. They understudy the principals, sing comprimario roles and get real stage exposure.

Baritone Fikile Mvinjelewa is a shining example of someone who has progressed from the choral training programmes to emerge as a leading performer of immense voice and talent. Heard recently in *La traviata* as

Germont père, in a joint CTO and Eoan Group production, he made an impressive debut two years ago as Rigoletto and starred last year as the Zulu King in *Princess Magogo*, a new African-Zulu Opera by Mzilikazi Khumalo presented by the Opera Africa Company in Pretoria. Directed by Sandra de Villiers, who is doing great things with opera in Gauteng, it starred the popular mature mezzo-soprano Sibongile Khumalo as the poet-princess Magogo.

Thanks largely to the charismatic and inspirational Mandela, South Africa has been the 'flavour' of the past 10 years. Conductors and

found at Spier, one of the leading recreational estates in the Stellenbosch winelands just outside Cape Town, and home to a major annual arts festival. Four years ago, Spier's owner Dick Enthoven imported Broomhill Opera's Mark Dornford-May and conductor Charles Hazlewood from the UK to oversee the development of the festival. They were commissioned to find emerging talent among disadvantaged youths, and they soon formed and trained a company to stage Bizet's *Carmen* along with a specially devised version of the *The Mysteries* in Xhosa, English and Afrikaans.

“Suddenly ANC members and government officials, who wouldn't normally be seen dead at an opera, found themselves bowled over by *Fidelio*'s awesome 80-strong Prisoners Chorus”

singers who shunned us during the apartheid regime are now proud to visit, even for reduced fees. Ex-pat Gidon Saks and US diva Lauren Flanigan raised standards and huge box-office excitement as Mephistopheles (*Faust*) and Abigaille (*Nabucco*) last year. Soprano Elizabeth Connell jumped at the chance to travel from Australia to sing Leanore. Hopefully, though, we'll soon have enough experienced black tenors, baritones, basses and wonderful sopranos and mezzos to avoid importing any.

Another big South African success in the field of opera can be

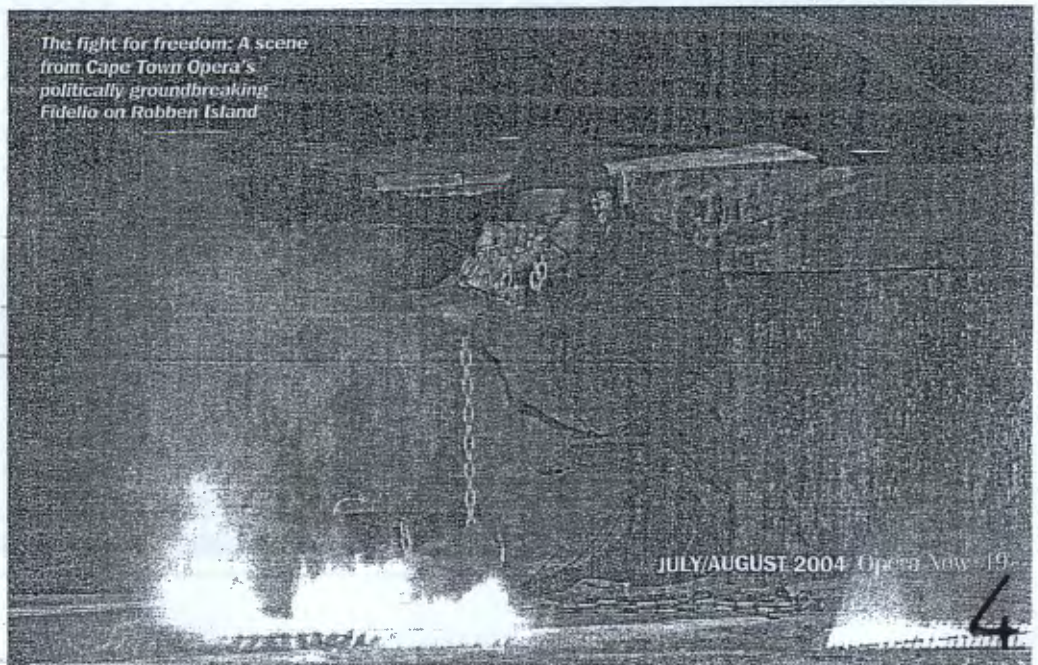
Pauline Malefane, a young singer from the townships and a member of Cape Town Opera's Vocal Ensemble, was catapulted from chorus girl to seductive *Carmen*. She was such a hit that the 50-strong company was invited for a season at Wilton's Music Hall in the UK in May 2001, and the two shows transferred to the West End for 12 weeks. Now calling themselves Dimpho Di Kopane (meaning 'combined talents' in Sotho), the group has toured almost continuously for the past two years. Its success has transformed the lives and the pockets of these young singers.

On the whole, though, opera battles to survive in South Africa. Companies are run as a tight ship. Funding is a struggle, compounded by the continuing weakness of the local currency, the rand. Though box office is healthy, seasons are limited to five performances. Audiences remain mostly white and conservative. Without sponsorship, patron schemes and the support of local government, we wouldn't see grand opera at all in Cape Town. But nobody is dropping standards, or neglecting audience development programmes, and new works are still presented albeit in a limited way.

One especially outstanding production (and a huge box-office success) was Brett Bailey's all-African version of Verdi's *Macbeth* for Cape Town and Pretoria in 2001, a supreme example of how African and European traditions can marry seamlessly. At the end of this year the Spier Festival, in association with Cape Town Opera, will be presenting the premiere of *Valley Song*, based on anti-apartheid playwright Athol Fugard's play set to music by Thomas Rajna. Indigenous operas such as *Enoch Prophet of God and Love and Green Onions* have come from the pen of Michael Williams, Cape Town Opera's general manager, and Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* has been translated into Xhosa.

However, the long-term survival of opera here depends on the new democratic government realising its responsibility to the hundreds of hugely talented black opera singers looking for a future in their own country. It's up to our political leaders to ensure that these wonderful voices of our 'Rainbow Nation' are never stilled. (11)

The fight for freedom: A scene from Cape Town Opera's politically groundbreaking *Fidelio* on Robben Island



THE VINDICATION OF A PERSONAL
BELIEF !

OPERA AFRICA'S
MAGIC FLUTE SENDS
A MESSAGE -

"OPERA IN S.A. IS ALIVE
AND WELL !"

Reviewed by Julius Eichbaum

I have frequently stated my firm belief in these columns that, given the right set of circumstances and the right artistic environment, South Africa could undoubtedly produce a finer crop of black opera singers than has ever come out of America

Thokozani Mkhize (Pamina), Bongani Thembe (Tamino) and the two Priests, Siphwe Blose and Babo Bhengu.

(Photo: Val Adamson).

and who would have the potential to take the international operatic world by storm. Despite this positive outlook, I must confess that, of late, I have become increasingly pessimistic about the future of this so-called "Eurocentric" art form in this country, given the antics of our new "arts Commissars" and those who scream the word "elitist" whenever opera (or classical ballet) is mentioned.

It was therefore with a sense of elation that I left the Roodpoort City Theatre on the night of 4 December after the debut performance in Gauteng of the Natal based company, Opera Africa. This vibrant, young company, formed only last January by Sandra de Villiers, former head of the Natal Technikon Opera School and run in association with her deputy, the singer Raphael Vilakazi, is, without doubt, the most exciting new artistic project to have emerged in this country for the last decade.

As I drove home, with the triumphal closing chorus of Mozart's *Magic Flute* still ringing in my ears, I felt - for the first time in a very long time - that opera in South Africa was, indeed, alive and well and with a radiant future ahead of it. Yet, at the same time, I felt a sense of disappointment that those who *should* have been present on this auspicious occasion, were conspicuously absent. Where was the Artistic Director of PACT Opera?

Even more importantly, where was the Director General of





Bongani Tembe (*Tamino*), Thokozani Mkhize (*Pamina*).

the department of Arts and Culture, Mr Roger Jardine, and his deputy, Ms Steinberg? After all, these are the people who hold the future of opera in South Africa - and the future of these highly talented young singers - in their hands. And, what about those mandarins who sat on ACTAG, promoting the demise of the Performing Arts Councils, and in consequence the destruction of the very bodies which will ultimately afford these young, black singers possibilities of employment?

To give him his due, the Gauteng MEC for Arts and Culture, Mr Peter Skosana, (who has in the past come in for some pretty torrid criticism in these columns) was present, and from all accounts thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

Nor did I see a single member of the newly appointed PACT Board present - and this factor alone, gives rise to grave misgivings on my part as to the interest they truly have for the arts.

Opera Africa's remarkable, stimulating and highly professional presentation of Mozart's *Magic Flute*, is the vindication of everything I have ever said in public or committed to print in these columns as to why opera in South Africa simply *has* to succeed - why it should not be lightly dismissed as being "Eurocentric" or "elitist" and merely swept under the carpet; why it *must* be promoted and funded to a far greater extent than it is at present by both the State and the private business sector. In short, we are standing on the brink of an international artistic phenomenon which will take the world

by storm and which will bring immense international prestige to our country.

At least there is one company out there which shares these sentiments and has the vision to support them. One simply cannot shower Nedbank with enough praise for what they have done for the arts in the past and what they will undoubtedly continue to do in the future by way of sponsorship and support. Their sponsorship of this milestone event - which, let us be honest, most other companies would have shied away from ("What! Opera, and by blacks!") - is deserving of the highest recognition by all who have the interests of the arts in South Africa at heart.

Themis Venturas' production, played against Patti Slavin's simple, yet effective stage designs - with just a subtle hint of ethnic overtones, was masterful in its solid and basic approach which, for once, was not overplayed, nor did it hamper the unfolding of the plot. There is always a temptation (as one saw with PACT Opera's production a few years ago), to go somewhat "over the top" in *The Magic Flute* in terms of sets, costumes, props and stage action - all of which tends to mask the underlying message of the opera, that of brotherhood, honesty and love. Venturas also did not fall into the trap of relying too heavily on the supposed Masonic symbolism contained in Emanuel Schikaneder's libretto. The scene of ordeal by fire and water which Tamino and Pamina have to endure was, quite sensibly shortened, and throughout the opera the action - broken up, in any event, into set arias and ensembles - was taut and unflagging.

The most exciting part of the production, however, was the "discovery" of an array of fine young voices and, with but one exception, each role was effectively and strongly cast. Despite being sung in English, which as any singer knows is more difficult than to sing this opera in the original German, I was particularly struck with the overall clarity of the singers' diction - something many of their white colleagues would do well to take note of.

One has to query the wisdom of teaching singers roles in translation when they will, in all likelihood, have to relearn them again in the future in the original language when they embark upon a full-time operatic singing career. To my mind - and fully considering the necessity for singers to understand what they are singing about - the ability to get straight into a role and grasp the essential style, is all important.

In such an array of fresh young talent, it is difficult to single out any particular singer for special praise, but, if a vote had to be taken, my own vote would unreservedly have to go to Thokozani Mkhize who sang the role of Pamina with great charm and musical assurance. This is a voice which has bell-like clarity, warmth and a marked degree of vocal colour.

Then, special mention needs to be made of Raphael Vilakazi's wonderfully rich, warm sounding and well acted Papageno - a characterisation which captured all the naivety, inherent goodness and bumbling good humour of the character. Again, any temptation to overplay the part was skilfully avoided and the final result was both convincing and hugely enjoy-

able. This fine young baritone goes from strength to strength with each hearing and already he is beginning to show every signs of being able to sustain an international career.

Mike Mkhize is one of those rare South African singers - a bass in the true mould. His performance as Sarastro was both vocally and dramatically commanding and he displayed a true "black" vocal quality, able to reach and sustain notes at the lowest end of the scale with a richness and fullness of tone which one seldom encounters in this day and age. A singer of this calibre will undoubtedly lend lustre to the local operatic scene and hopefully will prompt local managements to cast him in roles which will allow him to develop his already formidable potential still further.

Lwazi Ncube as Papagena gave a most credible performance in a role which really does not allow the singer much scope to show off her full potential. Yet, she came across well, with an assured stage presence and an attractive, clear and well focused voice.

Ruth Smith, as the Queen of the Night, coped well with the contradictory vocal technique the role demands - brilliantly accurate coloratura singing, one moment, followed by passages which would tax even the best dramatic soprano, as in the aria "Der Hölle Rache".

Bongani Tembe scored a palpable success as Tamino. Although one often sensed a faltering in terms of true Mozartian style, this was nevertheless a truly remarkable performance, with a clear, fluid vocal line which only really came under pressure and began to sound strained in the very upper register.

The Three Ladies, Bongi Simelane, Nozipho Mfayela and Bongiwe Khumalo, were excellent. Their voices blended well and there was just enough individuality of tone for them to emerge as distinct and separate entities rather than merely as a group of female singers.

The smaller male roles were also cast with distinction and without any weak vocal links - Falithenjwa Mkhize (the third Mkhize in this production, leaving one wondering if opera is now becoming a family business in this country) as the Narrator and Siphwe Blose and Babo Benghu as the two Priests.

Bongani Tembe (Tamino), Thokozani Mkhize (Pamina), Michael Mkhize (Sarastro), and Chorus.



Ruth Smith as The Queen of the Night

The only real weakness in the cast was Amon Hlongwane as Monostatos who, although possessing a pleasing enough voice and a good stage presence, failed to project his voice adequately and was thus inaudible for much of the evening.

The Three boys, Charne du Preez, Tutuna Tshume and Siabonga Buthelezi, were, despite their youth and obvious inexperience, surprisingly confident and vocally well assured and their voices blended well.

Weiss Doubell conducted the Pro Musica Orchestra with his customary well judged Mozartian style, although he adopted some surprisingly long rests between the opening chords of the Overture which robbed the first few bars of dramatic impact. Orchestral balances were not always of the highest order with the brass section frequently playing unduly loudly and swamping the rest of the orchestra - not to mention totally obliterating the singers who, on this occasion were, in the main, by no means vocal lightweights.

I have yet to hear a finer chorus on the Roodepoort stage than the members of the Durban Serenade Choral Society, who sang with precision, feeling and, when required, with great gusto and obvious enjoyment. It was, indeed, a night to remember. If (like SABC television) you missed it - kick yourself!

The great lie has been exposed through the efforts of those behind this endeavour and those taking part in it. Opera does, indeed, have a place in the new South Africa. ●



Disarming cultural weapons

In the second of a three-part series on the state of the arts in South Africa, Ceelean Jacobson looks at the political debates about the nature and role of arts and culture in society

PALLO Jordan is not impressed. This is the second time he has been to Grahamstown in 10 days and the weather is uncharacteristically hot. He is grumpy and, at a press conference marking the end of the National Arts Festival, he puts journalists ill at ease.

It had seemed like the right place and time to ask the minister of Arts and Culture how he saw the state of the arts in South Africa and what it expressed about the country's national identity but, considering his mood and the queue of reporters waiting for their sound bite, it suddenly didn't seem a good moment for such a weighty topic.

However, Jordan's intellect and tongue were as sharp as ever.

He fired his first salvo at those he sees as "actively organising against the emergence of a common South African identity".

They include "opportunistic" politicians who politicise racial or ethnic differences — and citizens opposed to the changing of place names.

"The issue of cultural identity is something that we will have to build up very slowly and over a long time. We come from a very fractured past," he says.

But Jordan — whose department puts out a steady stream of statements congratulating the latest South African cultural success — is generally upbeat about the state of the arts.

"It's like everything else in South Africa — it's in transition. It's undergoing transformation, which in some areas is fast; in other areas it is slow. But I think South African arts are having a huge break to burst forth and make a mark internationally," he says.

But why, he asks in his most scathing attack of the day, is there such an emphasis, in the mainstream arts, on European art forms?

"What tends to happen in South Africa is that when people are speaking about opera they are speaking about European opera, and what it entails is usually teaching African kids to imitate Italians," he says.

"What's wrong with the way Africans sing? Why should you teach them to sing like Italians? To make them into imitation whites — and poor imitations as well?"

Notwithstanding the success of the internationally acclaimed *Carmen eKhayelitsha*, a Xhosa adaptation of Bizet's *Carmen* by Cape-based theatre company Dimpho Di Kopane, Jordan says:

"If you go to Khayelitsha you can find tales that are far more tragic than *Carmen*. So why aren't we doing a real *Carmen* from Khayelitsha, a tragic tale in

Khayelitsha? Why are we borrowing from Bizet? Those are the questions the arts community have to answer for themselves."

He says there is "nothing wrong with someone from Soweto wanting to sing Verdi" — but it's a bit like exporting "spaghetti to Italy".

"What the Italians want to see is not someone imitating an Italian composer. They want to see someone from Africa doing something African. That is what they want from Africa," he says.

Jordan is not particularly impressed by the festival programme and only planned to see a performance by The Eastern Cape Cultural Ensemble called *Celebrating a Decade of Freedom*, which featured traditional African storytelling, dance and music.

So why doesn't he tackle the organisers of the country's premier arts festival about the works selected?

"We are not a government which prescribes what people should do. All we can do is voice our opinions, and, hopefully, people are listening.

"To say why are you putting on *The Snow Queen*? Let them put it on, but you should know as far as I am concerned it's not going to take you very far," he says.

It has taken Jim Ngxabaze from Kimberley to New York.

Ngxabaze is a member of Dimpho Di Kopane, which had two other productions at the festival, and staged in New York last year. There was their newer *Itumkani-kazi yekhephi*, a Xhosa-adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*, and the older *Yimimangaliso: The Mysteries*, based on series of medieval Bible plays.

In the latter, Ngxabaze plays Judas, dressed, like the other disciples, as a township gangster.

Ngxabaze, who joined DDK in 2001 after being with veteran Phyllis Klotz's Sibikwa Community Theatre Project in Benoni, says he once thought opera was "for old white people". Now, he loves it. "Opera is relevant to today," he says, over coffee before a rehearsal.

"It depends on how you interpret the story. Nowadays, you have to integrate things, do away with some of the old traditions. That is how culture changes."

While some, such as Jordan, may be more cynical about the increasing popularity of opera and ballet



among young black South Africans, others — among them Constitutional Court Judge Albie Sachs — see it as a reflection of the opportunities and talent lost by apartheid.

One-time cultural commissar of the ANC and now a regular at cultural events across the country, Judge Sachs says that in today's global village it is "unhelpful" to talk about Eurocentric versus African art. It's not as if African culture exists in some pure, unsullied form, he says.

"Africa has the right to employ all the mechanisms of the world. Africa develops, Africa imbibes from the world and contributes to the world, Africa is on the move."

"If we South Africanise our art, it means we draw on all cultural traditions, the languages, songs, dances of the world, because the world is represented by people living in our part of the world," he says.

Waiting outside the court to take delivery of a massive wooden monster, aptly entitled *Godzilla*, by Limpopo sculptor John Baloyi, Judge Sachs speaks of the patriotism that has sprung up around the flag and the popular song, *Shosholozo*.

With a surprisingly musical voice, he breaks into the song once sung by prison work-gangs, ending with a resounding "boom" to illustrate the sound of picks hitting the ground.

"It's an African song that has become a fully South

African song because it expresses exuberance, joy, energy and a sense of connection," he says.

It was Judge Sachs who wrote in his seminal 1991 paper, "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom", that "ours is the privileged generation" that will discover the nature of the new South Africa.

He called for artists to "shake off the gravity of their anguish" and produce works that spoke of the "new consciousness we are developing".

Today, he believes, a "very lekker South African personality is emerging".

"It's congenial; it's amused, energetic. We are anything but a bland society. Here things are restless and moving, interesting... there are always surprises around the corner."

And this is mirrored in the arts. "There is a wonderful trust in dancing that moves me every time I see a black male dancer holding up a white female dancer or vice versa."

Judge Sachs's paper is more famous, however, for his call to ban the slogan "culture is a weapon of struggle".

It was a harmful notion, he wrote, that had resulted in "an impoverishment of our art" and a form of "solidarity criticism".

"The power of art lies precisely in its capacity to expose contradictions and reveal hidden tensions — hence the danger of viewing it as if it were just another kind of missile-firing apparatus," he wrote.

Fifteen years later his words still ring frighteningly true; now it seems culture is in danger of becoming a weapon of the new struggle — transformation.

Artists complain about having to justify how their work will aid "transformation" when they apply for funding, how proposals regarded as not politically correct are turned down, how cultural organisations are run by government lackeys.

Application forms for aid from the state-funded — and bedevilled — National Arts Council insist on a racial and gender breakdown of a project and ask how "the community" will benefit. It also requires a reference letter from a community leader.

Dangerously didactic notions of culture are espoused by politicians and academics as they debate "The National Question", an ongoing discussion about issues of unity and nationhood.

The latest missive is a document prepared for this year's ANC national general council. It says that the national question is the "quest for a single, united

Why should you teach Africans to sing like Italians? To make them into imitation whites — and poor imitations?



Art's place in a transforming land

© From Page 39

South African nation with a common, overriding identity."

To achieve this, it is necessary to forge a common patriotism and South African culture, led by the African majority, it says.

David to disagree with the ANC's notion of nation building and you risk being branded "unAfrican".

Fear of alienating those in power is so pervasive, says Mike van Graan, playwright and stalwart cultural activist, that self-censorship in the arts is more rife than ever.

"We've become conformists rather than cutting-edge prophets," he says.

There may be more resources for the arts than before, Van Graan says, but what successes there have been were achieved despite the government rather than because of it.

The government's rapid transformation of the civil service has left arts administrations in the hands of less experienced people. As a result, the visionary cultural policy drawn up before 1994 has not been properly implemented.

In addition, the state's macroeconom-

ic policy has seen a shift away from subsidies and towards a more market-driven approach.

Van Graan cites heavy government backing of the film industry because of its marketability.

"Unless there is a market for your stuff, it doesn't have value," he says.

"We talk about these platitudes about art being the soul of the nation... where the arts can play a role in challenging meaning, provide people with insight.

"All those kinds of things are compromised because those works may not be the ones that generate millions of rands at the box office," he says.

Van Graan, like many other artists, has had to rely on foreign support and, more recently, on very welcome money from the Lotto.

Through his plays, such as *Green Man*, *Flashing* and *Hostile Takeover*, he uses his insider knowledge of local politics to tackle the status quo.

"For me, culture as a weapon of struggle is a timeless thing. All that changes is who is in power. If I was using my art to explore apartheid conditions, I want to do the same under democratic conditions when power comes to play in determining the spirit of the individual."

The tussle between art and politics is inevitable and never ending. It is how societies grow and cultures develop.

Innocentia Diamond, 16, is a cellist who has been playing for eight years with the extraordinary Buskaid Soweto String Ensemble, set up by British viola player Rosemary Nalden in 1992.

She has gone from not knowing what a cello was to it being her instrument of choice in a musical career.

There are high hopes she will follow her brother, Samson Diamond, who is studying music in the UK.

It may be that the people who still call Innocentia Diamond "abnormal" for playing classical music think she is

trying to be something she is not, but there is nothing fake about this bright, engaging teenager.

She speaks about her admiration for composers such as Mozart and Handel about the romance of Tchaikovsky and the pure enjoyment of playing the *kwela* arrangements.

"Music is universal. It speaks to everyone," she says.

For Diamond the cello has become second nature; it's how she expresses her thoughts and emotions.

"The cello is part of me. It is my friend," she says, hugging herself, as if embracing her instrument.

Buskaid brought down the house at a recent concert in Johannesburg.

Sticking out as much for her funky hairdo as her outstanding playing was Diamond.

Here were the tunes of the penny whistle, that nifty instrument for the poorest of pockets, being played by a 23-member string ensemble. Now, who's imitating whom?

● Next week: Local artists appropriate foreign cultures to forge a new, uniquely South African artistic language that speaks of "desegregation".

What successes there have been were achieved despite the government'

Dié 'Fidelio' ook

Heinz Fricke is in die Kaap om die opspraakwekkende opvoering van Beethoven se opera *Fidelio* op Robbeneiland te dirigeer. Tussen uitputtende repetisies deur het hy GOTT-FRIED MAAS op 'n koppie koffie getrakteer.

DIE korterige senior burger met die wit hare lyk ietwat verlep wanneer hy die trap van sy hotelkamer afstap. Tog is 'n mens verbaas wanneer hy sy geboortjaar verklaar: 1927. Vir 'n 77-jarige lyk hy goed en verrig hy werk wat menige jonger mens flou sal maak.

Hy ken Europa, Noord- en Suid-Amerika, Asië en Australië, maar in Afrika is hy die eerste keer. Gemoedelik gesels hy oor dié *Fidelio* op die plein van die eertydse gevangenis waarin ook oudpres. Nelson Mandela was. Die opvoering vind plaas omdat dit op 27 April tien jaar is sedert die eerste vrye Suid-Afrikaanse verkiesing.

Fricke ken *Fidelio* met sy tema van liefde en bevryding goed, maar 'n aanbieding op só 'n plek teen só 'n politieke agtergrond is ook vir hom nuut. Die repetisies vir die groot projek is veeleisend. Kort ná ons gesprek moet hy weer die eilandboot



Heinz Fricke, Duitse dirigent.

haal. Ook die vorige dag het lang ure (met reënontwrigting) meegebring, al was dit 'n openbare vakansiedag. Maar dié veteraan van sowat 180 operas en vele konsertstukke sit nooit lank stil nie.

Fricke, 'n enigste kind, is gebore in Halberstadt, nou in die oostelike Duitse deelstaat Saks-Anhalt. Al het sy pa graag klavier gespeel en sy ma gesing, was hulle onderskeidelik manshaarkapper en tuis-teskepper. Heinz het op nege met klavierlesse begin en volgehou totdat die Tweede Wêreldoorlog (1939 tot 1945) dit onmoontlik gemaak en hy hom as laerskool-onderwyser begin bekwaam het.

In die laaste ses oorlogsmaande moes hy, soos vele jongelinge en bejaardes, veg in Adolf Hitler se "volkstormloop", 'n

laaste desperate poging om die Geallieerdes se knyptang-beweging teen te werk. In April 1945, minder as 'n maand voor Duitsland se kapitulasie, het Fricke onoorloof per fiets by familie gaan kuier. Iemand het dit gerapporteer, sodat 'n verhoor hom in die gesig gestaar het. Hy kon na 'n Amerikaanse eenheid vlug, waar hy tot Februarie 1946 aangehou is.

Dieselfde jaar het hy in Halberstadt se teater werk gekry. Twee groot dirigente het hom geslyp: Hermann Abendroth in Weimar en Erich Kleiber in Berlyn. Laasgenoemde is die pa van die eweneens gevierde dirigent Carlos Kleiber. Onder Kleiber sr. se leiding was Fricke van 1952 tot 1955 in Oos-Berlyn in die Staatsopera tot die oorlog die voorste Duitse opera huis. Omdat die gebou destyds nog bom skade gehad het, het die opvoerings elders plaasgevind. Van 1950 tot 1960 het Fricke ook die wêreldberoemde Gewandhaus-orkes van Leipzig gedirigeer.

Ná 'n kort skof in die Oos-Duitse stad Schwerin was hy van 1961 (die jaar toe die Muur gebou is) tot 1992 weer in die Berlynse Staatsopera, uiteindelik as musikale direkteur totdat hy op 65 moes aftree en deur Daniel Barenboim opgevolg is. Maar van rus was geen sprake nie.

Reeds in die Koue Oorlog het Fricke gereeld in Wes-Duitsland, elders in Europa en in Japan opgetree – selfs in Wes-Berlyn, wat vir Oos-Duitsers taboe was. Dié owerheid het dit traag toegelaat omdat Fricke as goeie "advertensiebord" beskou is en gesogte valuta gebring het, waarvan die staat 'n groot deel gevat het. Om seker te maak hy kom terug, moes sy vrou agterbly. Dit het Fricke van 'n oorloper laat a sien, al was verleidelike aanbieding

Eiland-opera regstreeks op grootskerm in Groenpunt vertoon

BEETHOVEN se opera *Fidelio*, wat oormore op die plein van die eertydse gevangenis op Robbeneiland opgevoer word, word regstreeks vertoon op 'n grootskerm op die Groenpuntse kriekelveld, agter die stadion.

Die opvoering begin om 19:00, maar die verrigtinge op die eiland kan van 18:30 gratis op die skerm dopgehou word.

Radioluisteraars kan *Fidelio* regstreeks op SAfm hoor.

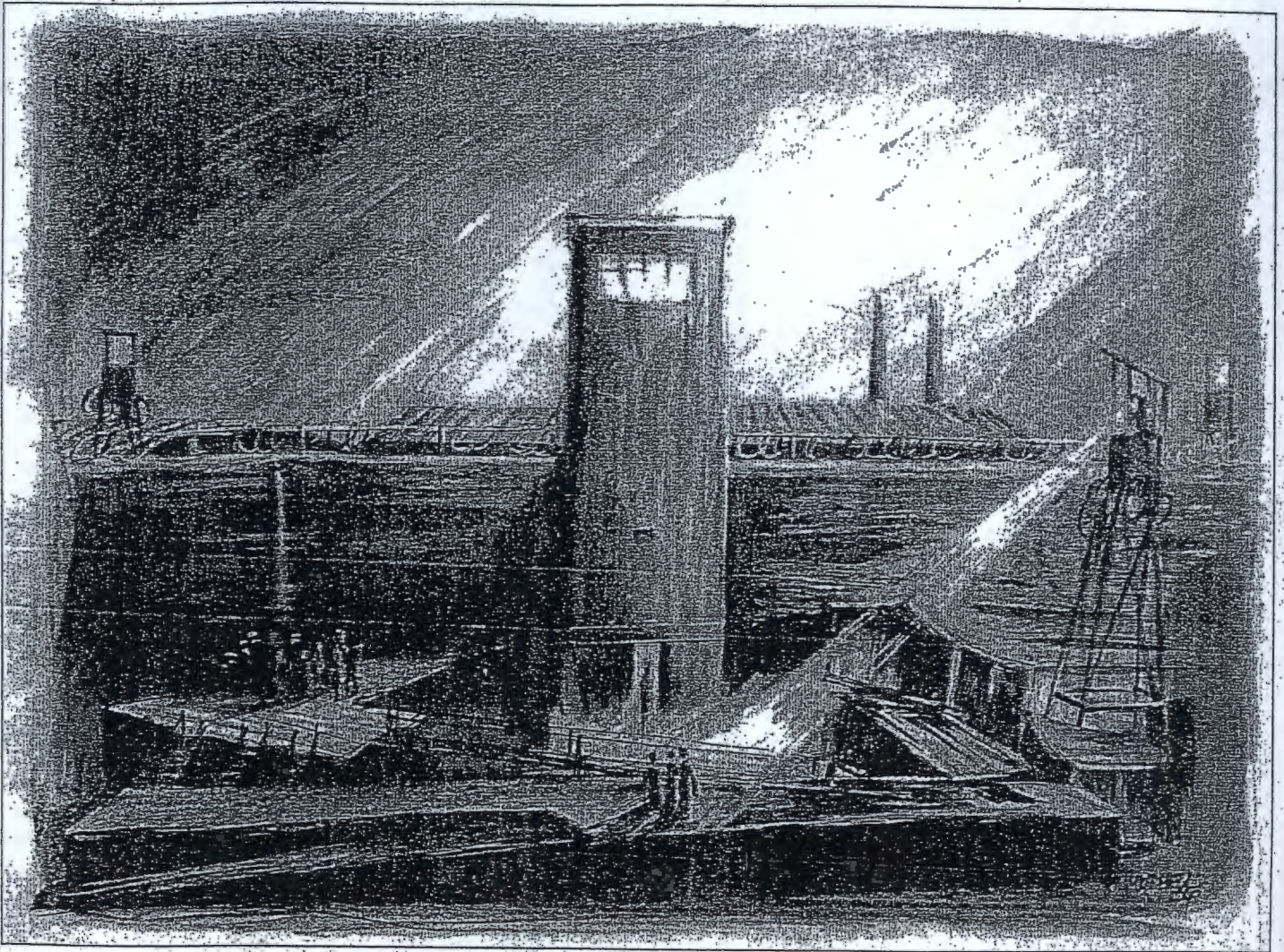
Die opera, 'n spanpoging van Kaapstad Opera, die Noorweegse Opera en die Kaapse Filharmoniese Orkes, word opgevoer met die samewerking van die Kaapstadse munisipaliteit, die Universiteit van Kaapstad (UK) en die SAUK. Angelo Gobbato is die regisseur van die nuwe produksie. Dit word aangebied ter viering van tien jaar van demokrasie in Suid-Afrika, die UK se 175ste bestaansjaar en die 150-jarige lange vriendskap tussen Noorwee en Suid-Afrika.

Kaartjies teen R1 250 is beskikbaar by Computicket, die V&A Waterfront, die Kunstekaap-skouburg, die Baxter-teaterkompleks en die BO-Kaap-museum.

Vir die klederepetisie vandag word mense uit mindergegoede gemeenskappe gratis na die eiland gehring. Die repetisie en die hoofopvoering word opgeneem vir 'n beeldsending op SABC2 op 25 April.

Vir nader besonderhede kan 021 447 9108 gebel word.

nuut vir veteraan



'n Grafiese voorstelling van die stel van *Fidelio* op Robbenefland.

daar. Sy "te veel" tyd in die Weste het hom wel in 1984 sy hoogleraarspos aan die Berlynse Musiekuniversiteit gekos.

Hy en Annemarie Wegener, ook van Halberstadt, is al 53 jaar getroud. Hul seun, Andréas (52), is 'n rekenaarspesialis en pa van 'n 26-jarige inligtingstegnoloog-seun en 'n 19-jarige skoolmeisie. Sedert die val van die Oosblok vergesel Annemarie haar man op sy reise, en sy is ook in Kaapstad.

Waarheen die Oos-Duitse regering hom nie laat gaan het nie, is die VSA. Maar in 1991 het hy daar met 'n konsert in San Diego gedebuteer. Kort ná sy aftrede in Berlyn het die aanbod gekom om musiekdirekteur van die Washingtonse operagesel-

skap te word. Dit is hy steeds. Sy artistieke direkteur is sedert 1996 die Spaanse ster-tenoor Placido Domingo, sanger in menige opera wat Fricke gedirigeer het.

Die Washington-opera, in die Kennedy-sentrum, is volgens Fricke ná die New Yorkse Met die grootste in Amerika. Dit het 'n vaste koor en "puik" orkes. Die soliste kom en gaan, soos dit deesdae gebruiklik is. Nostalgie dink Fricke aan Berlyn, waar hy 'n hegte ensemble soos voor die stralerjaker-era gehad het. Tot met die Muur se val in 1989 het die Staats-opera konstant 60 werke in sy repertoire gehad. Tans trek Berlyn se drie operahuisse noustrop weens die kleiner staatsubsidie en ekonomiese insinking.

Ook in Washington is geld skaars, want dit kom net van borge en loket-inkomste. Maar die geselskap oorleef, en Fricke is ná 11 "harde" jare trots op die standaard wat hy kon bereik. Gereeld dirigeer hy nog elders in Amerika en in ander lande, maar sy woonplek bly Berlyn – die huur-woonstel wat hy al voor 1989 gehad het.

In sy Staatsopera-tyd was hy ook ses jaar musiekdirekteur van die Noorweëse Opera.

Hy reis baie. Net in Japan was hy al 17 keer. Tog sien hy weens sy werkprogram min. Hy hoop om darem Tafelberg te leer ken voordat hy Maandag die Kaap verlaat. Dit wil soms te veel raak, gee hy toe. Maar van op hou praat hy nie.

New funds needed to keep arts in city alive

Monday 11.11.96

CAPE TOWN will lose both its symphony orchestras in March if the necessary funding is not committed by November 28, warns **KENNETH MARCUS**.

THE Cape Town Symphony Orchestra will close on March 31, 1997 (and the Cape Philharmonic will not be far behind) ... unless the people of Cape Town and the provincial, metropolitan and local tiers of government understand that they must support this internationally respected cultural asset now.

Next year will be too late. There will be no classical concerts, no opera, no ballet, no musicals such as *Les Misérables*, and no outreach programmes of education and awareness in the broader community.

This is so because, as musicians leave the city to establish themselves overseas, there will be few left to assist in staffing music colleges at universities and music schools and the future of such schools and colleges will be in doubt.

An orchestra should be instrumental in social reform. For this reason, the boards of the Cape Town Symphony Orchestra and Capab are considering uniting the CTSO and the CPO, realising that a merged orchestra will be faced with the task of adapting to the new political and social order.

The merger is designed to amalgamate all resources and reduce overall costs to make it more acceptable for public and private funding.

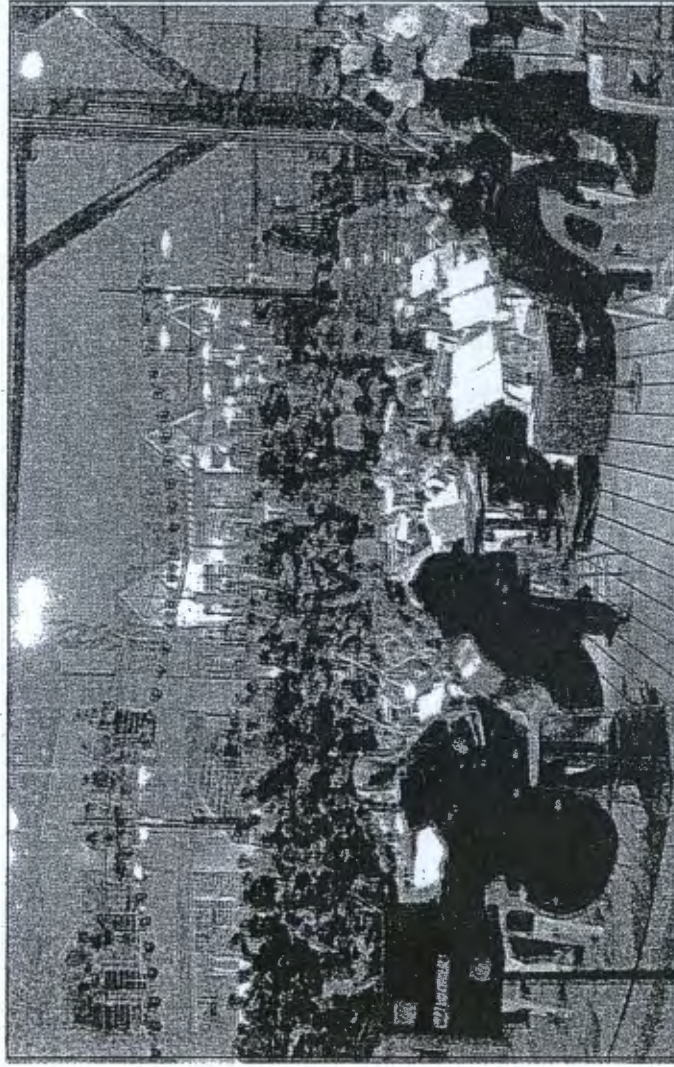
There will be an ongoing commitment to a substantial educational development programme, dedicated to training future musicians from all South African communities, and to expanding the audience base across the rainbow spectrum.

A business process plan was produced on October 31, the selection of musicians and management will be accomplished by November 30, and the new orchestra will begin performing on April 1, 1997.

But this depends entirely on the necessary funding being committed by November 28, when a decision will be taken and announced at the annual general meeting of the Cape Town Symphony Orchestra Association.

One thing is certain: the arts have to be run as a business.

No Africa, for instance, the arts and entertain-



DON'T STOP THE MUSIC: There are plans to merge two of Cape Town's orchestras, which will reduce costs and amalgamate resources. Funding is needed from public and private sources for the arts to survive.

omy, eclipsing even the motor and electronic industries.

In South Africa, there is no such "sink or swim" attitude; instead there is a culture of entitlement.

The time for pretending that the arts are different is over. There has to be a mix of public and private funding for the arts to survive.

A White Paper has made it clear that the emphasis is to be on developing the artist and not the art form while guaranteeing funds for theatre complexes and services. The rechanneling of funding will leave arts organisations not used to funding for themselves seriously disadvantaged. The White Paper also makes it clear that the private sector must take on funding responsibilities.

While acknowledging those far-sighted companies which have come forward to sponsor the arts, I must make a plea to others to promote and encourage the vast reservoir of performing and creative tal-

It is no coincidence that after schools in English-speaking countries abandoned music education for fiscal reasons, with countries in Europe following the practice, the new generation has less empathy for classical music.

The third factor in funding is the audience, the consumers of the product — ballet, opera, symphony concerts — who decide whether a production has merit.

That same audience, unwittingly wielding more power over the arts than anyone else, often refuses to take its role in promoting and supporting the arts seriously.

Musicians, artists and arts organisations cannot guarantee the future of the performing arts.

While it is the duty of the state to provide an infrastructure within which the arts can develop and prosper, it is also up to every single citizen to do their share.

The business process plan leading to the proposed merger of the CTSO and CPO spells out the vision and objectives. It provides for a "right-sized" orchestra of about 85 players, an appropriate number of administrative staff, and conditions of employment in the new Section 21 company.

A bargaining committee, to be chaired by Mr Justice D Shearer, a retired judge from Natal and a former member of the board of Napac, and comprising members of both orchestras, will be established.

The plan is to take into consideration an in-house "swot" (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis, as well as a suggested annual programme for concerts, ballet, opera and education. The new orchestra will be housed at the Nico, with performances in the Opera House.

A budget has been structured and our projections indicate a significant shortfall for the year to March 1998.

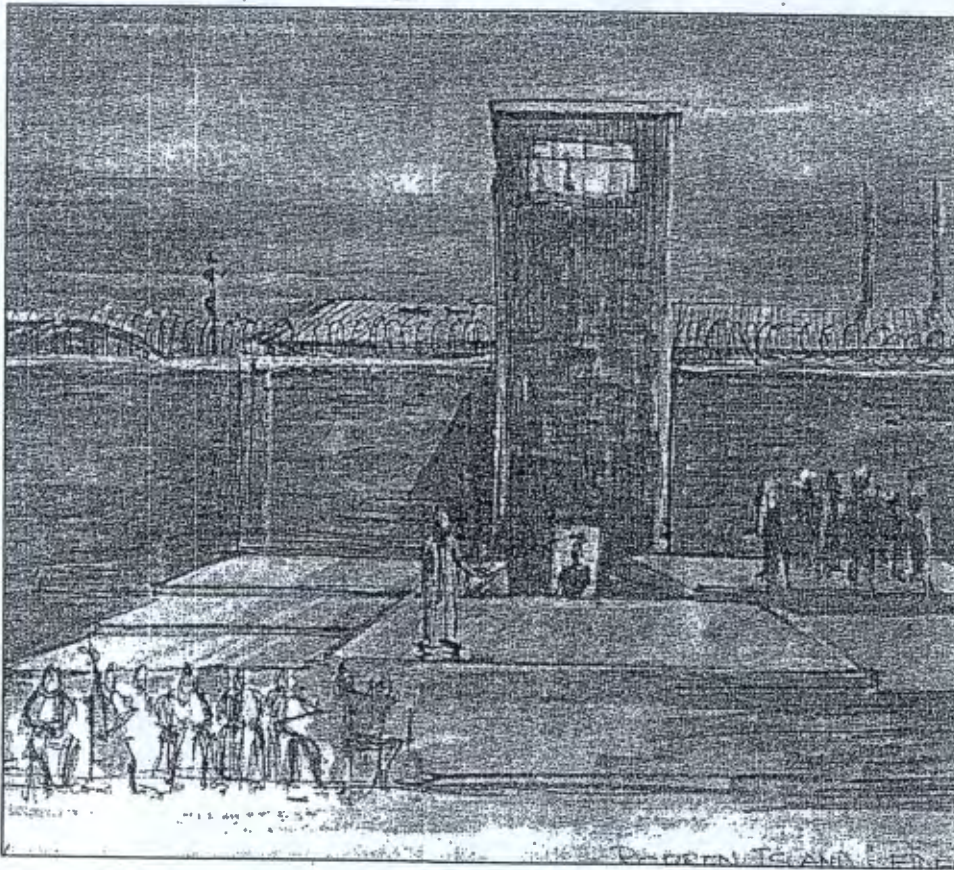
Meaningful financial commitment from public and private sectors will be required by the end of November, either through our Investor Plan or by direct corporate and individual funding and sponsorship.

If we do not receive this funding or a guarantee of it by the end of November, musicians and management will close on March 31. The CTSO will close on March 31, and the CPO shortly thereafter.

Keneth Marcus is the convener of the CTSO task force

Dekade van demokrasie met 'Fidelio'-vryheid gevier

Beethoven op Robbeneiland



Michael Mitchell se ontwerp van die tronkoneel in Beethoven se *Fidelio* op Robbeneiland.

Thys Odendaal

Beethoven se "vryheidsopera" *Fidelio* word aanstaande jaar op Robbeneiland opgevoer as deel van die feestelikhede om Suid-Afrika se dekade van demokrasie te vier.

Kaapstad-Opera is die enigste operageselskap van die indertydse kunsterade wat sedert dié nuwe demokratiese orde oorgebly het.

Die voorstelling – gepas in die binnehof van die Robbeneiland-gevangenis waar die eerste demokratiese president, Nelson Mandela, langer as twee dekades aangehou is – word deur Kaapstad-Opera en Den Norske Opera (DNO), oftewel die Noorweegse Nasionale Opera, op Saterdag 27 Maart aangebied. Dit gedenk ook "die 150 jaar van vriendskap" tussen Noorweë en Suid-Afrika.

In Maart sal die Noorweegse geselskap ook betrokke wees in *Fidelio*-konserte in Johannesburg, Durban en Port Elizabeth.

Angelo Gobbato, hoof van Kaapstad-Opera wat pas uit Kanada teruggekeer het waar hy Verdi se

Nabucco op die planke gebring het, is die regisseur van *Fidelio*. Olaf Henzold van die DNO is die dirigent van die Kaapse Filharmoniese Orkes. Die konsertmeester is ook 'n Deen.

Michael Mitchell ontwerp die dekorstel.

Die rolbesettings is nog nie bekend nie, maar die tronkbewaar-der Rocco en die tronkhoof Don Pizarro word deur Dene gesing en die ander rolle deur Suid-Afrikanners.

Die koor van Kaapstad-Opera het die afgelope klompie jare tot 'n opwindende en gedugte ensemble ontwikkel, en vorm die ruggraat van 'n groot saamgestelde gemeenskapskoor wat die ontroerende passasies van die gevangenes sal sing.

In die loop van die jaar sal Suid-Afrikaanse sangers met die Norske opera in Kopenhagen en Oslo optree.

Die Robbeneiland-opvoering word regstreeks op 'n reuse-skerm die laaste Saterdagmiddag in Maart in die middestad van Kaapstad uitgesaai.

Die Nasionale Loteryverspreidingstrustfonds (NLVTF) is die hoofborg van die eiland-*Fidelio*. Die woordvoerder van die fonds, Sershan Naidoo, sê Kaapstad-Opera verdien die fonds se ondersteuning: "Ons dra graag by tot die opbou van 'n nasie wat sy kulturele en kunste-erfenis koester. Dié projek voldoen aan alle voorwaardes."

Bjorn Simensen, hoof van die DNO, het gesê *Fidelio* is 'n treffende voorbeeld van die triomf van die menslike gees oor onderdrukking.



Puccini lives again - in Soweto '76

'La Bohème: Noir' cast gets R300 000 state backing

JULIAN PITMAN

Everyone is equal in the new South Africa - plumbers, bricklayers 0 and opera singers.

The Department of Labour now gives the same training subsidies to budding electricians, computer fundis and opera divas, because it sees opera as a job creator like any other enterprise.

Millions of rands from the national budget have been put aside to train unemployed people in a variety of jobs.

Now 26 black opera singers whose training was funded by the department are preparing to sing in *La Bohème: Noir*, the South African adaptation of Puccini's great opera *La Bohème* at the Nico Theatre Centre.

The opera group has been trained in choral techniques for 60 days as well as stagecraft and design for eight days.

The Government has earmarked R300 000 for the group's training.

"The opera is a smash-hit, their voices would reverberate around the world and tours could take place."

The opera centres on Giacomo Puccini's heartbreaking story of a young man and his beloved who die of poverty in Paris.

"It's really a love story set against a harsh background," said a Nico spokesman.

Kolele Sixaba, 28, a bass baritone, said he was excited about opening night. He said he would like to teach singing to others in the townships but would also like to go overseas for more training.

University of Cape Town music student Makhosonke Mkhwanazi, 24,

who will sing in the chorus, said singing Puccini was challenging.

He said he also wanted to teach others and learn more himself.

Choral mistress Vetta Wise said the difference between the traditional *La Bohème* and this production was that young people were playing young people's parts.

"There's nobody pretending to be young," she said. "Usually more mature and established singers play these roles."

Librettist Hal Shaper said: "*La Bohème: Noir* parallels the political censorship, repression and violence of the apartheid years. South Africa had become not so much a state of mind, as a state of mindlessness: of everyday cruelty, poverty and despair."

"This *La Bohème* is set in Johannesburg on Republic Day, May 31 1976, two weeks before the Children's Uprising of June 16."

Designer Malcolm Mitchell said it was hard to imagine a greater contrast than between Paris on Christmas Eve in the mid-nineteenth century and the seething black township of Soweto on the eve of the 1976 riots.

In February, the next group of 26 unemployed singers will be trained for the same period at a subsidised rate of R74 a day. Students will be paid a salary from production profits.

Julian Jacobs, spokesman for the Department of Labour, said the agreement to train opera singers was the first of its kind in the country.

"Artists are part of the employment force," he said. "If you are an unemployed artist, you can also get training. It's not only a programme for black people."



Local talent: Lindile Kula, Fika Majola and Fundile Mkosi publicise the opera *La Bohème Noir*, which will open at the Nico on December 17

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Curtains-up for opera 'workers'

LAURA THORNS

In chinos and a colourful open-neck shirt, Julian Jacobs looks little like the civil servant he is.

It is difficult to picture him in his office at The Department of Labour with, as he puts it, opera playing in the background to "keep him sane". We meet in the Company Gardens for coffee and a chat about the Department's involvement in *La Boheme Noir*, a re-working of Puccini's *La Boheme*, now set in June 1976, and featuring an all-black cast.

Jacobs calls the agreement between his department and CAPAB "an historic milestone". It is the first time that the Department of Labour has focused on the training and development of artists, expanding its definition of "workers" to include musicians, singers, performers and other arts-related professions.

"As a Labour Department, we've always pumped money into training, development skills, bricklaying, pottery... but not the arts. Normally it's the Department of Arts and Culture that pumps money into this. Here was a unique situation. There were unemployed artists who would never have been part of this production without our support," says Jacobs with quiet pride.

It is quite surprising that this pilot project should be an opera. Opera is considered to be the "most threatened" of the arts in South



Demonstration: the cast of *La Boheme Noir* perform in Khayelitsha

Africa since the dissolution of the Performing Arts Councils. Many powerful politicians regard it as the most "elitist" of art forms, as inaccessible and irrelevant. Certainly, *La Boheme Noir* is doing something interesting and even slightly subversive of traditional perceptions of opera and its place in our new society. Here, a form with overwhelmingly "white" connotations becomes a vehicle through which to retell a dark chapter in South Africa's black history.

How will the "old-guard", that group of staunch and largely conservative opera supporters.



Cast: Fikile Muijela with Connie Mermami and Cherylene Martin

needs to undergo a serious change, and Jacobs hopes that the opera will receive national television coverage on June 16 next year.

Asked about the "all black" casting, and whether it reflects a broader policy of his department's new training and skills-acquisition for artists programme, Jacobs is adamant that it does not. "We will help anyone," he stresses repeatedly in his quiet, level voice, "white, coloured, black, Asian."

It is hoped that the Department of Labour's brave and unconventional support of the arts and its concern to redefine artists as work-

ers will gain support. The decision to "pump into arts-skills training in this instance, that credit has been lent to a performer whose credibility has meant sponsorship for the proctor whole has been forthcoming certainly would not without the department's support.

Decisions such as the potential for a new potential for the arts, and may dispel disillusionment being fed and arts-interested people result of the new arts dispensation.