



Leslie Travers Leading the Way

By Dana Pinto

Leslie Travers, recognised worldwide as a leading award-winning international Set and Costume Designer, trained at Wimbledon School of Art and creator of some of the most memorable distinctive stage designs in opera, musicals, drama and dance in our generation. Renowned for his pure poetic landscapes, sculptural grandeur, characteristic colour palettes to opulent costumes, there are significant ingenious devices, seamless scene changes, a very selective process of materials where everything has a purpose or story using scenography as a catalyst to create extraordinary theatrical spatial experiences. For every performer, every member of the production and every spectator, who has the opportunity to experience Leslie Travers' designs live and first-hand, recognises that there are further wonders to his design than meets the eye.

In this interview, you will read into the remarkable different creative processes of *Giulio Cesare* (Opera North), *Elysium* (Den Norske Opera), *Francesca da Rimini* (Teatro all Scala), *Peter Grimes* (Aldeburgh Beach), *Jenufa* (Malmo Opera), *Katya Kabanova* (Scottish Opera), *Rebecca* (touring with Kneehigh Theatre), *Don Carlo* (Grange Park Opera) and *Death of a Salesman* (Manchester Royal Exchange), each respectively approached with compassion and originality.

GIULIO CESARE (OPERA NORTH)

D: *Giulio Cesare* with Opera North is a wonderful example of bringing different cultures and different times together. Can we begin by setting the scene, the background of Giulio Cesare and what inspired you to create the set with reflective surfaces?

L: The piece is set in Egypt at a time when the Egyptian Empire was in its twilight and glory days. There was this remarkable ruler who came into power and capture the imagination of Cleopatra at a time where mighty Egypt was going to be annexed by the Roman Empire that came in the form of Giulio Cesare. It is set in Egypt itself, practically in the world of Cleopatra, her brother who is also her husband Tolomeo within the faded grandeur, splendour and power and then we have the figure of Cesare who hunches that world and he is Roman and corporate. It is interesting because you feel that the palace where we spend a lot of our time is a political space of intrigue, of asides, of deals, of skulduggery and danger and you can't represent the whole thing on stage especially with Egypt where you feel at some point you have a sense of the grandeur and power in front of you.

Tim and I started off in our usual way and developed three or four approaches to the production. What I love about working with Tim is that one of those is always the film version where we can do everything that Cecil B. DeMille could have done in a sound studio in Hollywood, to approach with the maximum production and then to work on the almost minimal production where it is a few objects. This is a very useful way of working because it gives us a breath of the scale of idea. What percolated out of that very quickly was the desire to find an object that through its geometry and through its movement could deliver the whole opera in what seemed like one action exploring the turn of the geometric shape. We started with what I have a beautiful African bowl from Nigeria which is round and bronze that is dark and lustrous on the outside and inside it is gilded and polished gold metal. It is a beautiful object that I brought into the studio and we played with that and it became the beginning of an idea of how an object could turn and create corridors, dark spaces and then become a throne room. I wanted to have a define geometry through a few little adjustments, different positions that we feel we are in a completely different space and the world has moved on. My ethos is generally that we can go back to the same space again, but it needs to have changed, developed and the implications of how the story has developed on its skin.

When we think of Egypt we immediately think of the pyramids and its geometric shape that incredibly ancient and eternal but also very modern. The forms of Egypt were incredibly simple, direct and akin to the modern movements like the Bauhaus and the work of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. We wanted to have the feeling of the modernity, powerful, architectural and almost like a Mies van der Rohe like space and so this gold box developed with its slanting walls resonate of a pyramid that was bronze on the outside and gold on the inside. Bronze was about strength, battlements and eternal and even that itself was treated like it was decaying over a thousand years and then the inside was a mirror-like gold that was actually lacquered aluminium that was not exactly like a mirror but had a mirror quality. What I really loved about it was that it had life under its skin, it alludes to something almost mystical. When you look into the panels of the wall, you could be going into another reality and I found that really intriguing in this piece and very powerful way when you put these powerful living mortal people within the idea of the eternal mystical space living their difficult lives in this splendid interior. It was treated like it was decaying and giving another depth and ultimately a vagility like everything passes. It gives a sense of the human story of how our lives are short and everything that happens within it has a sense of urgency.

Tim and I work very fast and I put objects in a box. We started with a walled space, like a bowl, it was like a square bowl to start off with. We thought that if we are very strict with how this works and it turns one way and we see and go through the story and work very carefully with the libretto and the music constantly referring back to the score of where we are and how possibly through of action of this object turning we could go into the different spaces. As we went along, it served some scenes incredibly well this idea of the turning structure but others felt slightly compromised and what did was made a cut through it off-centre so it could part and it gave another level of complexity and that was enough to free up to answer every narrative idea in the piece. Tim and I always work with miniature versions of the characters so we have scale figures and we work out where they are in each scene, who are in the power positions, so who is higher, who is lower, who is listening, who is about to come in, why are they coming into this space, how do they leave and what do they bring with them. By not having a lot of objects on stage it is interesting because it allows every single item that is brought onto the set to have a certain resonance and purpose. By bringing on a candle and suddenly you are saying that day is changing, and it is becoming night-time and the atmosphere is changing in the palace. You can bring on a pyramid box which is the same shape as the set, the Thai gold nails that Tolomeo puts onto his fingers was another way of bringing on a crown where it says more about his power extending himself out into the space that suggest him being salacious and strange. Then how a chair can be a Roman chair within an Egyptian space, the idea of annexing a nation as the Romans did. Cesare leaves the throne for Cleopatra, but it is a Roman throne interestingly. So, everything including the props become more than something that someone drinks from, but they carry the narrative of the piece and work as powerfully within the hands of the performer just like huge scene change can work is an interesting thing.

D: Your design bring together a beautiful combination of cultures and times. Can you elaborate on this approach?

L: As well as looking at Ancient Egypt, we looked at images of the Middle East with the colours and textures because the palette of the Middle East is incredible colour wise and texturally so we didn't want the characters to feel like they were isolated in the past and that we don't recognise. There is a resonance with work like this and it says something about our world today and so there is a conscious mix of the ancient world with the modern especially through the costumes which was very playful and opened up what the costume would be. We wanted to say who these people are, what their position is, what their journey through the piece is, who is equal to them and who is not. And that is what we were very conscious of in the research process of the show as well as glancing and looking into Ancient Egypt that we also looked at our present worlds and the idea of globalisation and powerful nations with how they behave and how things haven't really changed. And yes, it is about Ancient Egypt and Rome, but it is also about who we are now, and emotions do not change, and the emotional values of the piece don't change and are completely recognisable which is what I love about Handle.

D: Can you give us insight on what inspired the costumes, the use of colour and status through the costumes?

L: We first meet Tolomeo and Cleopatra who are brother and sister, Co-Rulers and they are husband and wife where in the Egyptian world Rulers married their siblings because no one else was as powerful or appropriate and they were able to keep the power within their family and with that knowledge I wanted to keep that parity and to make them a mirror-image feature. The blue that we see is a precious colour, the most luxurious lapis blue is through history and art a precious colour and in Renaissance paintings it is given to the highest people in the

paintings, for example we think about the Madonna, and it has this cultural power that felt really appropriate. I do not want to do a pastiche of Egyptian clothing, I wanted to say something that was quite surprising. At the beginning they are in chainmail that is quite luxurious, slightly more Hollywood style like gold dressing gowns saying more about the position and glamour of Egypt within that and then we see they getting dressed on stage that is something Tim uses always really brilliantly is the costume story of the people actually transforming, so rather than going off and putting on a costume that you will see them change that drives the story on with helps with their thinking and what their trajectory is in their daily life. I came up with the idea of making Cleopatra and Tolomeo exactly the same, so they had these lapis blue satin suits that were actually four-piece suits so as well as having long trousers there was the possibility of wearing shorts as well and loafers, to make them absolutely parallel. The idea of the suit is the idea of power, the politicians just like when we see the summits with the leaders of the world, it is about power-dressing and there is tailoring and that is how power represents itself clothing wise and so the idea of the suit of strong tailoring took care of that but the colour brought in to suggest that we were somewhere very different and in their incredible place of Egypt. So, we start off with them being equal and then their costume goes on a journey through the piece. Cleopatra dresses up as Lydia to seduce and start the process of seduction of Cesare when she realises her brother is a risk to her power and her life. I wanted to play with the gender like the Egyptians did with metamorphosis and became living Gods that would transform and so Cleopatra goes from the blue suit to a dress that I wanted to almost have an Egyptian silhouette. I found vintage dress I bought from China that had these incredible panels on it that are timeless but also modern as well. The Lydia dress was made from silk fabric from Varanasi that again has this incredible vintage, powerful, luxurious feel but with this modern cut dress so you have the modern and the ancient at the same time. Then how she puts this dress on, we see her make the choice to wear this as the image she wants to present to Cesare, and he thinks she is Lydia but then he follows her and sees her get change in an incredibly intimate moment. The scene where she takes off her tights and washes her feet in a pool of water which I think is probably, visually, the most beautiful moment in the show because she knows that he is watching her but he doesn't know that she knows, and so with that knowledge it is a performance and it is written as a performance like a pastoral dance of shepherdesses but we did it very simply, and this is what Tim is so good and accurate at, and him seeing this as an incredible personal and intimate moment that is utterly beautiful and all it is in her taking her tights off and washing her feet. We are very careful of how the story develops, there is a point where she puts the suit back on, but it feels more dishevelled and she hides under the jacket and an old Roman coat that is more corporate looking and ready for war. With Cesare we avoided togas and went more for the modern military and modern image of taking over countries with the bulletproof vest, the military clothes and all in greys and blacks. The reason for that was against the luxurious, eclectic world of the Egyptians, the Romans were more direct, more corporate, more minimal and more of the clothes of the new day.

ELYSIUM (DEN NORSKE OPERA)

D: *Elysium* at the Den Norske Opera brings about a different yet intriguing approach to creating a design for a new piece. How much did Rolf Walling and Mark Ravenhill have in regard to the influence on the design, if any, and likewise how did the design have an inspiration for creating the score? Also, being set in the future, how did you go about researching for *Elysium*?

L: What is interesting about *Elysium* was to be involved so early on in the process when it wasn't completely written, where there was an idea for what the opera would be, where Rolf Wallin and Mark Ravenhill were exploring what they wanted the piece to become and to

explore these things with Den Norske Opera in Oslo who organised a workshop of music with chorus members and soloists. This was very early on in the process, so there is David Pountney and I, Rolf and Mark, and we as a group this is our first proper coming together and sharing possible ideas of what the piece could be. It was a concentrated time in Oslo across two days where we would listen to the music live that has been written so far and talk it through. It was a very important time with people very busy and schedules so just to have those two days with everyone in the same space was really important. The piece that developed was very different from the one at the beginning. The one at the beginning where there were infinite possibilities in the story and through those two days what became the genius of what we ended up with.

We often had meetings in my studio, so there would be Mark, David, Rolf and me, at my round table and we would talk about where the piece was and how it was developing. At the end of the two-day workshop that was utterly brilliant, to hear the music play live, because often when you have freshly composed music you cannot hear it you have a reduce score and the promise of the Composer telling you what it is going to sound like but that is coming from his head and somehow you have to get something similar into yours and that can be difficult. So, it was good to get a sense of the soundscape and we sat down on the last evening and talked it through and David and Mark put on top of it was add an edge and drama of what it would be like as the last moment of being human beings on this planet.

The world has moved on and human beings have moved on like you get your phone every two years, it is a better version. Humanity has succumb to the culture of reboot and improvement and we have ended up in a future where as transhumans we do not need the internet as we have that in our heads as we can communicate almost telepathically, we live forever, we don't age and we don't suffer. All of those things are what many people aspire to. Interestingly in our piece, we kept forty human beings as we are now and put them in, almost, a museum like a box where they are preserved for transhumans to see where they came from. It is an immoral thing of putting a person in a sort prison but an interesting premise for an opera.

Opera being opera and the need for drama, we are at the end of this experiment where these forty human beings have been kept and every year, they have to do a performance of Beethoven's Fidelio. That is their one task that is watched by the transhuman world and this is an interesting premise to start from as a Designer because it is a sort of museum, but also a prison and how do you make somewhere a prison without putting up bars and you make the outside world so mysterious and frightening that this is a space you have to negotiate. What is interesting is that the purpose of the space is to deliver a performance of Fidelio, and so I thought that this could be a machine that people lives their lives on somehow regardless of its function. The function of it is about one thing and that human life needs to be more complex and that became quite interesting. The mechanics of it was that it was slow at the beginning, just like a flight simulator, that it was waking up. Within it there are living quarters that are like dressing rooms and the top of the structure is really a stage, but we do not know that at the beginning.

I love the scale of the stage in Oslo because you can strip out all the masking and use the empty shell and it's this wonderfully dark metal emptiness and I put this object in the middle of it like an oil rig in a way where it is isolated, where you feel that the people only live in this space and they negotiate life in this space like laboratory rats. What is brilliant about the theatre is that it is a box of tricks and it has incredible mechanics. At the beginning of the piece, I thought it would be really exciting for the audience to walk in and there is nothing on the stage just emptiness and darkness. The set was huge and was kept underground that slowly turned and fitted the music at that point where it started very quietly, and we don't know where we are, and we are telling you in increments and the audience slowly begins to work out what this is. By the end of Act One, you know what is happening as we did not want to give anything away from the beginning.

Something that keeps coming up with my work is that there is a process that has nothing to do with the story at all, but it absolutely delivers it by chance almost and sometimes that is what life is actually. We can't control the world around us, things happen sometimes good, sometimes bad, sometimes physically threatening and sometimes they are wonderful. So, I feel that process is going on that they are caught up in this machine to deliver this performance, but it brings into focus the human story and it gives urgency because we see people moving and involved in other processes on the set. And so, throughout the Act it turns and by the end of Act One it becomes this stage for the performance for transhumans which by this point we or the humans have not seen them. They talk about what they are and there is a little boy in the piece who, like us, identifies with us as an audience and asks whether they would be strange, or like monsters, are they frightening and his mother says that she doesn't know and that they are just out there. The mother is locked away, but he is useful and wants to know more. It is almost like television where there is something out there who is watching them, and we played with that and the use of light. Linus Fellmom's lighting felt almost intrusive and little bit theatrical but also artificial like a television experience but that is what I love about Linus' lighting because it is within the concept.

D: The costume designs, particularly for the transhumans, are incredible and the readers would be intrigued to read about your costume research and the approach you took towards the 'light' costumes in particular.

L: I wanted the human beings in the piece to be recognisable in their leisure wear like tracksuits something that says people do not have much to do, they are offstage as if they are 'at home' and resonates the prison uniform. I felt it would be interesting to give them a capsule wardrobe where they only have five things that they can wear in whatever combination we want to but that is all you have. And so, how would you make a hoody top belong to you, so do you wear it with the hood up, open or tied around your waist or over your shoulders where you can find an individuality in a very limited wardrobe. There are pieces in the music that are almost monastic, there is a quasar and religious elements because they are trapped in this structure and of course you are going to look above and what's out there and I thought hoods would be interesting. There is a character that dies, and they all put their hood up and there is a resonance of religion and mourning. And then on the other side there are the transhumans costumes that are interesting because as soon as you think about articles of clothing they date where you are, they reference the past or become very specific like North Korea or we are doing a glamorous modernist suit like a Tom Ford version.

David and I sat down looking at reference and every possibility and I said "what if they were all naked?" and he said "umm perhaps" and I thought actually weirdly what if they are because if you don't age you are immortal and you are this superhuman, you probably do not need clothing and probably have moved on beyond that. David then suggested whether it might be another form of expression like light or something bacterial like the nervous system and I played with that then came the idea of light costumes of using rope light that were kinetic and have an emotional value that could change and have a reaction almost like animals that can change the colour of their skin depending on situation they find themselves in. I thought that this was an interesting idea to pursue. So, I went to the costume department and asked that all this time to develop this idea, we had two years, could we explore this idea of light costumes and they said "absolutely, you tell us what you need and we will walk it with you to develop this idea and see where we go". What is interesting about the light costumes is that it didn't just involve the costume department but also the lighting department and they looked after this very well. So, I would go over there every six months to do test and try things out and developed

the costumes over that period of time and it was interesting to work that way because quite often as a Designer you are responding to the work and how the work is it is a closed door it is finished thing but as I developed ideas to David, Rolf and Mark and so I like to think that the designs had a voice in the development of the piece and I could directly talk to the Composer and say this is what the transhumans would look like and he would say what the sound was going to be because they made incredible sounds and the reason why they became so abstract as their music was so extraordinary, electronic and many octaves. It was very useful for the Composer and the Librettist to see the reality of what the piece could be. There is something freeing about making a statement saying that this is what the people are wearing it is a restriction but also once you have these restrictions it can be absolutely liberating.

FRANCESCA DA RIMINI (TEATRO ALLA SCALA)

D: Can you talk through the design process starting with your initial ideas, research, the inspiration for the play of space and your processes to create your set design for Francesca da Rimini?

L: The piece is based on the play by Gabriele D'Annunzio of the same name. D'Annunzio was a love of war and art, beloved of the fascist and lived in an incredible house in Lake Garda in Italy. His home was like a living museum to himself that tells you all his ambitions and his extraordinary character. David and I looked at pictures of this house and we decided to start our process there, so we went on a field trip. This is something I love doing with Directors in my work, when we go somewhere that has a resonance about the piece where we have the freedom to get them for a few days where we can daydream to come up with ideas with no pressure just the freedom where there is visual resource that can spark ideas and playfulness. So, this time it was the house of Gabriele D'Annunzio because in a way the piece is about him, about the side of this man of the aesthetic Francesca and Paolo the man she marries. We went to this house and has this incredible space. It has these huge gardens, there is war ship and an amphitheatre that overlooks the lake, and, in the house, there is a collection of objects that he found inspiring, beautiful, elevated and some junk. There were bits of planes, boats and military objects, and we spent the day there talking about the piece and just looking around then by the end of the day I sat on the steps of the amphitheatre with David and looked to the lake and we imagined we were doing the production there and he said "we have got this space, a marble step structure what if you pushed through the idea of the military of war through this beautiful space like cannons appearing through steps. The piece starts with Francesca who is young person who has ambition of what she wants to be, who she wants to love and suddenly that is taken away from her and forced to marry a man who is not the man she loves and retreats into the world of books, of myth and Wagner's Tristan and Isolde stories of heroic romantic love. Then David said "I think what you should do Leslie, you should make a war machine out of all these parts. I don't know how you do it but could you do it" and that for me was so exciting that I could not stop thinking of what this thing could be.

I immediately, after our two days there, I went back to London and started work. I started with sketch models of what the set could be and very early on I thought it was definitely a kinetic structure that one world is enveloped by the other and they already exist there and we might not see them both at the same time, so became like a clockwork object, a piece of sculpture or a carriage clock. Interestingly, the story is set in a medieval romantic world, but the world of D'Annunzio is the First World War, the modern machinery of war, a mechanical war and that was an interesting thing and I had decided very early on that I would combine the two worlds. You look at images of the First World War, the machinery or war of tanks and cannons that there was something medieval and it was a natural fit. Then I thought there were two textural

languages, the world of Francesca of white marble, luxury, simple and grand space with sculptural elements and a space that was elevating. The other world, the military world was one of iron, rust, oil that would be inappropriate with the world of marble and to place those two things together which was suddenly exciting and how one would have an effect on the other. I played with the idea of the inner space to make, if you look at the romantic Pre-Raphaelites, there is always a sculptural element and rather having a sculptural element that were decorative but rather something that has resonance of the story and politics under its skin. So, I came up with this huge figure of a girl bathing in a private moment bathing in a bath, and so everyone is existing on this giant piece of sculpture. I then took that sculpture on its own journey from the piece where at the beginning she was looking down to the centre of the space toward Francesca, and in some ways this sculpture is Francesca, and she is guiding her eyes to look at the story and by the end of Act One, the military world curves round closing like a clasp around the inner space as Francesca is taken out of the aesthetic world. What was really important was that you saw Francesca go from one world and into the other where she would be uncomfortable of marriage in this piece. You would literally see one world take over the other, the marble taken over by the metal, militarised structure almost like the insides of a submarine. It was a world of men who are there to service cannons and wage war, so it is another kind of sculpture like the big figure. In this world rather than using lots of military objects, I used cannons. When the play was first performed in Rome, D'Annunzio insisted on real cannons in the production and real fire and he fixated the audience and damaged the theatre. The cannons were stuck in my head and there were cannons in his garden and I thought I wanted this sculpture to carry these weapons as elegant column like at the beginning then coming down and of course doing a show at the Scala you want there to be fire. Before the interval at the end of Act Two, this whole structure opens again, and we see the huge cannon comes down towards the audience with the climax of the music. I just love the idea of building up and scale and then we realised that this whole machinal set is really a gun turret, an object of war so Francesca's world is contained within that making her story very interesting and desperate. So, when she later in the piece goes into the world, she finds safety in her imagination, you can understand why.

I developed the set with models and for the very first time I was making 3D drawings on the computer because the set was so kinetic and interconnected with elements through each other it had to be delivered in such an exact way. It was somewhere between creating a piece of jewellery and a watch. The computer lends a hand to a level of accuracy and I just found that way of working very fluid and meant we could super-turbo charge the process very quickly and be very bold where we can develop a very complex idea and throw it away quite quickly and bring it back or reconfigure it or rescale it. We had quite short time to deliver the whole production so actually this really helped, and it was a method that I now use all the time. It allowed us to take a bird's eye view of the design and we could see what was coming next and how we could deliver things in a different and interesting way. In the end, the mechanics were very clear and what I designed became the construction drawings.

PETER GRIMES ON ALDEBURGH BEACH

D: How did you and Tim arrive at the decision to set the performance on Aldeburgh Beach? What was it like to assemble your set onsite and create costumes that battled with environmental elements outside of your control? What challenge did you face when designing outside along a promenade? Building within a theatre is safe, dry and controllable, but what was it like to design on location?

L: I was very excited at the prospect of being asked with Tim to do a production on Peter Grimes at Aldeburgh because for 1: it is set there and 2: Benjamin Britton grew up and lived there, so it is very powerful about that place and so to take the work home was incredibly exciting. Jonathan Reekie, at the time was ran Aldeburgh, and really want to do a production of Peter Grimes but he felt that the concern hall was too small and very difficult to fit in a production and give it the kind of energy that it required visually. Jonathan had the idea of doing a promenade through the town so Tim and I went up to Aldeburgh and we walked around the actual locations of the opera in real time and imagined what it would be like to get 3000 people around a very small town centre and looking, sometimes, at very small buildings. And would it be the experience of that the characters are having in the opera and the decision was No. Logistically it would be too complex and take too much time. So, we went and sat on the beach with our fish and chips, looking to the amazing seascape and along that shingle beach. I do not know who came up with the idea to do it here, but it made so much sense to set it here. The most powerful thing in the production were the things that we had no control of. These were the elements, the weather, the sea, the sky and the shingle beach, but also they gave you so much for free and also made our lives incredibly difficult and it was worth it. So, we decided to explore the idea of doing the production on the beach and I have little videos of Tim walking down to the water and how you disappear off the edge of the beach before you get to the water. It is an interesting thing about the beach in Aldeburgh that there is an invisible spot. Tim and I talked about what period it could be in and we thought to set it just after the Second World War where the world was in recovery, melancholy in the air and felt very vibrant. The beach is very long and panoramic so instantly I felt the set should be involved in that and it shouldn't be a theatre set because the scale of the beach is so huge, and you want something that engages with that. Quite quickly I came up with a promenade wooden structure that was long and in the end was 100m long and dwindles off the end in decay. The structure had to feel like it was once new and through constant storms, the movement of the beach becomes quite wrecked and it fitted the concept of after the Second World War where the country was still smouldering. We played with the idea of the promenade and had intentioned that the people would sit on the shingles on blankets with their flasks and very much a community experience. It should be raw, alive and engaging. Creating the promenade would elevate the performance and people could see them against this incredible sky and against the sea. Upon this structure I created little moments of intimate human life where the characters to play out what they were doing during the day, so it wasn't a complete abstract structure but felt it was a community. The structure was right on the line between the sea and the beach. I grew up on the North Sea coast in a house overlooking the sea and that area of the beach is hostile. It is the frontline of the weather coming in of big waves and this was a big risk of that structure in that area.

We did three weeks of rehearsals in a film studio in Wimbledon and we moved everything to the beach in Aldeburgh and at the same time the set was being constructed from scratch on the beach. Much of the set was made there and small elements were made offsite then clamped on and joined the structure but everything else was done on the beach all the carpentry and all the painting. The chorus arrived from Opera North and student from the Guildhall School of Music. It was an interesting proposition to take musicians who are used to the rehearsal spaces and then taking them outside then rehearsing on the North Sea coast. I was quite anxious about this because it was a very different way of working and to focus because of the scale of this structure. As the chorus arrived, everyone was so positive about what they saw was happening and the scale of it and generally the cast became really excited and all those worries I had about whether they were going to be cold all the time went away and everyone got caught up at the excitement of making the event and it felt significant.

D: For all who experience Peter Grimes on Aldeburgh Beach, whether it is spectator / performer / creative, the impact from the sounds of the North Sea, the powerful voices, the change of light from day to night and the influence from the weather will no certainly play an impact. Even the vast sky as a playful backdrop that would change throughout the performance, where each minute would differ greatly to the next. It would have been difficult to predict its colours and shapes created by clouds etc. How did you consider these elements through your design process?

L: We rehearsed on the beach during the day, early morning and after rehearsals set work continued including painting then at night, we would light the show until the early hours of the morning in the freezing cold north easterly wind that would blow every night. Lucy Carter who lit the show did a fantastic job. It was so unique and there was something exciting creating an opera outside and the thrill was the risk of it and found is liberating to work in that way. When we got to the dress rehearsal, Aldeburgh was fantastic in how they organised it and how they informed the community on the what the performance was going to be that people were not going to be sat on chairs and be comfortable but they had to bring things and people were in the spirit of it. The performances were each very incredibly different. The weather on each performance was completely different, a completely different atmosphere. During the dress rehearsal it rained all afternoon and then the rain stopped and to was glorious sunshine, it was like a Caspar David Friedrich where the skies were romantic with clouds and shattered lives. On the opening night, it was bitterly cold with e consistent North Sea wind that blew across the beach and I was worried people would stop focusing on the show but gave it a kind of intensity. You are constantly being reminded that you are outside, and it made what the performers did feel like the most generous gift.

Costuming the show was very interesting, as a Costume Designer you want to say who the people are, why they are there, how do they relate to other people, how they change through the piece and where they are going. I also had another thing to do on the production was keeping people warm, so much time was made to create layers of insulation that didn't read under the costumes and still made it possible for people to sing which was a constant thing we had to attend to, the pastoral care.

On the second night, it was foggy and eerie to the point that the set nearly disappeared in the fog but didn't and that was incredible. On the final night, it was just extraordinary and for me was the most beautiful. A scene in the pub where everyone is talking shelter from the storm and Grimes come in and he stood on the highest point of the set on a crow's nest on a boat and the clouds parted and through this you saw the actual moon and when he finished the moon disappeared again. I remember standing with members of the production team looking at someone and said that we will never see another moment like that again ever in our lives where nature and our designs come together so perfectly. It was a wonderful experience because we allowed it whatever it would be as we couldn't change the elements and what they gave us was this incredible atmosphere.

JENUFA (MALMO OPERA)

D: How would you describe your approach to Jenufa? The changing destruction of the set creating new landscapes is powerful. What were the themes of Jenufa to initiate this central intention? What were your intentions for the audience to witness the set deconstruct? What was it like to design for such a vast stage like Malmo Opera?

L: Malmo Opera, I believe, has the largest stage in northern Europe and it is huge, and I love it because of the scale of it. It is very exciting but a difficult stage to use If you want to fill it

but appropriate for a piece like this where you have a community that is isolated a long way from a city where people do not pass through and it doesn't reflect the current atmosphere politically where things come through and information comes through telegraph wise a long way which could be either acted upon or ignored. It is interesting because it is a sort of rural community of traditional and fixed views that by the end of the piece, we feel that the world is completely changing even in that community will be affected by what's coming. We decided to set it in the Soviet Union where would be a sense of decline as well. I wanted to create an isolated object that would serve every scene but not over-elaborate with a sense of abstraction to it and that it was almost made by the craft that was available of that world. It was a wooden structure made with slats of wood and its construction is its design. It would provide the sense of the Mill, where the wall would be bathed in the last summer sunlight. We go through three seasons in the piece, from late summer to a cold frozen winter then to the early part of spring. Where the seasons change there is a sense of violence such as where the ice of winter cracks. At the beginning in the overture, there is a real sense of the world turning, of the world itself going around the sun, the mill wheel turning and with the cycle of nature. The story is how the people fit their lives in the world and that they live in of the natural world and then the rules we create, the artificial ones. Interestingly, Malmo has a huge revolve and I am not a big fan of revolves because they just go round and can be convenient and when you repeat an action over and over again you feel it less and less. But what I did for Jenufa was that I did use the revolve and it turned all the time and it turned very slowly which was almost interceptable that would allow this sculptural wooden building to unravel very slowly. Orpha and I wanted to avoid people walking into the world but appeared out of this structure, so as the set moved a scene could come into view before the people were required on stage almost like a piece of film with the camera tracking round. Eventually that scene would come into view and the singing would begin and that is how we delivered the scenes. So, you never had anyone walking into the wings and off, in fact I blocked the wings off so it was in a kind of sky box that almost looked solid so people appeared in this structure to emphasise it was an isolated community where there is tension and little choice in who you talk to, who you fall in love with and who you plan your life with. So, through the piece as well as turning it starts to disintegrate and within that process each space would deliver a scene very differently and it is only one action of the set evolving.

It is a rural community in the times of the Soviet Union they were working in the mill, more like a factory, where it is less of the collar and more of the era of canvass and cotton workwear with a sense of poverty and the feeling of austere. It would probably be a society where people drink very heavily as an escape. We bought a lot of original industrial workwear because you get a lot of that detail painted and dyed into it. Jenufa's costume development was a faded cotton dress and as she goes through the piece her clothing aged, so in the second act when it is winter and had the baby and she is ill, Jenufa is there in a nightshirt almost like a ghostly apparition. In the last act, we get the formal crepe dress that is very austere like and very grown up like she was going to leave the community and go to somewhere like Moscow. It was almost like dressing her for the image of her future life.

KATYA KABANOVA (*SCOTTISH OPERA*)

D: The story of Katya Kabanova can be described as 'Scandi Noir' for being unreal and dark. How would you describe the set and how does it represent the story? The play of horizontal lines of the steel bridges coming down to bring multiple levels, the vertical wheat, doorways and lines in the corrugated panels bring interesting use of lines as well as the peering into other environments. What was the intention of the opening and closing of spaces? Together with the use of lines, there is a distinctive use of textures from the natural and man-made structures such

as a rust of the metal and the softness of the wheat all creating interesting compositions when brought together for a scene

L: The set is the bridge over the Volga river and when Stephen Lawless and I originally talked about the production and he loved the idea when you look at a bridge you can see all these people walking forwards and backwards that if you just pick one that this would be the story we tell and if you picked another it would be equally interesting. We start the production with people walking across this bridge and home into this story which will end very tragically connected to this river. It is a piece that deals with an isolated community at the end of the Soviet empire and we are at the furthest place from anywhere. It is a really rough community and forgotten with an industry that is dying, people lack purpose, people drink heavily, there is tension and there seems to be no way out of this circumstance. This is the kind of thing that a lot of communities' face after industrialisation, so it was very apt for this piece where Katya is in a difficult situation and it is very difficult to escape from. I created a bridge and dealing with a manmade element in this circumstance it is at the end of its life that would be rusting, flaking, it gets no attention, the rivets are popping, and it would groan and about to break when it moved. Then you have the river with the bridge in two sections and they can move independently and in some ways recreating the actions of the river as well, the sense of the flow of the river that would increase and decrease in volume and it allowed me to create different dynamics in the space that people could move away from each other and then feel disconnected. It was a maze of steelwork, trapped within this structure again so we can transform from this bridge to become a factory where everybody works of yet another rusting structure. We were able to close off the idea of nature and even behind the set there is an immense Russian sky on the plains where it goes on forever and we could close that off in the factory then open a door and see it through an aperture and so we rescaled things. The question is who was in the space and why are they there. With Katya, there was always the desire to ascend and be free and Stephen always loved the idea of manmade heavy architecture above Katya that presses down and gives the idea of wanting to arise ascend with more power rather than the open sky with a scene on a hill top when one could do anything. It almost made Katya's desire to feel futile and heart-breaking. Katya dies at the end of the piece and throw herself into the river. Stephen and I wanted to heighten the drama, obviously, decides she will throw herself off this bridge at height, so you feel like her whole life and lived within this structure. What I like to have something that doesn't serve a domestic situation very well and has this industrial feel and make it work as human as possible.

D: How did you approach the costume design and in particular for Katya?

L: The young girl, Katya, who Stephen really wanted her to stand out and being slightly apart from everyone else. Katya is not part of that family that she married in and he really wanted her to wear white which I thought was really clever. The costume could be based on nature and reality, but this brings it back into the narrative and as she descends into difficulty. There is one scene towards the end of the piece where she gets lost in the floor as the set floor was predominantly mud, so this white dress that she wears all the time goes from being very clean and fresh to be covered in mud at the end and actually smears herself in mud then gets wet so the costume goes through a story that is really important and a reflection of how she is feeling emotionally.

We set it in the late 80's, we had incredible textures to play with and Katya was natural and cotton then used a lot of synthetic fabrics that we don't use now with that awkward heavy weight to it so when we tailored it into suits the hang of them brought back the mid 80's.

REBECCA WITH KNEEHIGH THEATRE (TOURING)

D: Originally, a novel by Daphne du Maurier in 1938, then was transformed to the stage at the Strand Theatre in 1940 then became Alfred Hitchcock's movie in the same year, and now presented as a performance bringing intrigue, suspense as a touring production to many. Your design cleverly brings Manderley and the seashore together to represent the past, present and future. How did you come to the idea of bringing exteriors inside against the sudden ending staircases, irregular floors almost reflecting the characters and Mrs de Winter's uneasy welcome? Also, what were the challenges you faced to design a touring production?

L: This production a quite a big tour of United Kingdom, it had to go in in the morning with the performance was the evening, so it was a one-day installation. Quite often when I am on productions you would have a fit-up period which sometimes can be over two weeks but obviously sets go in and out, but this had to go in very quickly. At the beginning, I ignored that because the most important thing is how to tell the story and the visual world that you create and at a certain point to bring in experts such a Production Managers and Tour Managers to sit and look at all the theatre plans of the theatres we know it is going to tour to and then to start develop a way to create the world of the piece within the constraints of the tour. It is always a challenge but it an enjoyable challenge because it puts pressure on your work, so you have to distil your ideas. One thing I wanted to so with the piece was to create a world where we could go to where sometimes all the worlds co-existed, some worlds being evoked in a wonderfully fibrous way that Emma Rice, Director, does by evoking interiors by using a piece of floral cloth or people holding candles. It is about location and it is about mood, so I was very sure I wanted to create a world that was already there for every scene of the play.

Interestingly, working with Emma Rice is through workshops and you explore the piece. Emma wrote the script which was really exciting and demanding because she left nothing out of the story. We developed the brief of what the piece could be at the Kneehigh Barns that are on the south coast of Cornwall which for this piece is perfection because it is the world of Rebecca, the cliffs, the sea, the lands that pulls from out of the water where the sea has a magnetism. We spent a week with Actors and Musicians trying out scenes of the play, living together, singing together, exercising together and playing volleyball together and working on what the brief of what the visual world could be in this intoxicating influential world. Emma said something to me that was so exciting for a Designer to hear was the phrase "Don't make life easy for me" and what that suggested to me was a set that was like a playground, physically demanding but the playoffs would be great and where the design wasn't something that had existed around the performers, it was there it was a performer in the space itself and people had to negotiate and find a way through it. I created the idea were the beginnings of a grand staircase where we know we are in Manderley but know it was burnt down at the end of the story, so what was interesting and exciting was to rebuild this house through the actions of the characters. The house is a character into the piece, the house is Rebecca and when you evoke the house you bring back the character who is very powerful in the piece, but we actually never meet.

So, we have Manderley that floats above and we are in the wreckage of the house but also at the bottom of the sea in the final resting place of Rebecca and in-between is the world of the fisherfolk of local people and how we move and create journeys between the spaces. It is suggested that Rebecca is murdered by her husband Maxim, her body is tied to the boat and sinks to the bottom of the sea and this is how we started the show with the sinking of the boat with a chorus hauling the boat down only would we see the boat in the second half that we would bring the boat back to discover how Rebecca dies. It allowed us to overlay images, texture and build up an intoxicated world. I wanted the house to be daunting and intimidating with Mrs De Winter being young, hopeful and in love. She comes into this world of in toxic

and impossible environment, ruled by a housekeeper Mrs Danvers who is still in deep mourning for the mistress of the house, Rebecca, who you feel she was really in love with and it was more than just respect therefore her feelings to the new Mrs de Winter become murderess. And how this young person negotiates this impossible world of grief and intrigue but also the world of autocracy.

I worked very closely with Emma in the costume world of the piece. Costume is everything to Emma and she likes to walk into every detail of the show with you and that is very exciting. You explore the characters very intensely through costume. You both looked at images from the 30's and images from different periods that would evoke the character. Interestingly, we did this fancy dress party in the piece just before the interval where Mrs Danvers encourages the new Mrs de Winter to dress up as Rebecca and we created a lace dress with a performer who was very happy to be naked underneath in this 1930's lace dress where the lace almost became animal print and that the nudity underneath was empowering and this became the image we finished the first half giving insight what the character of Rebecca was like. So, for one moment through the new Mrs de Winter, Rebecca was alive again onstage.

With Emma's work, people play many different characters and it was important to find things that were emblematic with visual connections that could be put on very quickly so that people could jump out of the chorus of fishermen wearing long black weathered oilskin and take that off and suddenly be a 1930's character underneath it all and that is very alive. I do absolutely love that fact that we do scene changes onstage and that they go from one character to another that is very exciting, and we were very careful to pursue to help you move into the next scene.

DON CARLO (*GRANGE PARK OPERA*)

D: Set in the 16th century where even King Philip II of Spain's palace, El Escorial, outside Madrid has dark interiors, renaissance paintings adorned on the walls and the Plateresque (dark gothic) styled interior, how much did you research into the 16th century to achieve the Gothic representation on the set? Also, considering Don Carlo is one of the grandest operas to stage, what challenge did you face and how did you overcome them, particularly the auto de fe scene?

L: It was very exciting to design Don Carlo with the Grange Park Opera. The proportion of the Grange is really exciting because we can create a real sense of intensity and a real sense of intimacy with the audience. It was not an event happening far away over the orchestra pit, but it was very close to you. Jo Davies, the Director, is really good at directing political and personal stories and what was really exciting about our version of doing it was that you were very close to be able to see the facial expressions and Jo very cleverly with the challenges of the piece with the talented opera singers that they are. There is a rise in spectacular within it but also the most macabre spectacle when we have the auto de fe. The Grange Park Opera does not have any fly system, or a sophisticated system of lifts and I do not find that a hindrance but what I felt we needed to do was to have a set that would deliver the scenes very fluidity. Something I always do with my work is I do not really do scene changes or I do not ever want to do a pause where a curtain comes in, where the audience have to look away from the story happening and fall back into their lives because you break the spell. The set will move to express where we are going to, so the change of atmosphere should be the challenges to keep the narrative in the story.

We are in the Spanish court of the 16th century and it is a dangerous place of intrigue, of survival by wit, luck and death lurks around every corner. The Church is more powerful than the King and therefore the King has to align himself with the Church and even he is at risk, so we have this incredible politics of the piece and how these characters survive within this world. I wanted to create a world where it is almost innocent and start off in the tomb of Charles the Fifth and

a crypt lit by a catafalque of candles with the body of Charles in the middle. You get the separation of the set and the idea of the Church being very powerful, the monarchs bowing to the Church and I wanted to create the allude to that interior of grandeur, architecture and the power of entombment, the living in the tomb of the dead. Then we go to the scene of the women above and it is a hot day, suppressive and we are just of the other side of this wall of this space that is relentless where light comes from above. The texture of the set was metal and heavy with the idea of permanence and of being unbreakable. It would take centuries before the world would change and within this there is one object of nature and I often use this metaphor in my work which is his tree with light coming in from above. I wanted there to be a continuous action that was fluid in movement but always moving on. We never went back to the same scene before it was always different and if we had something that resembled something we have seen before then it would have changed.

The *auto de fe* is an incredible section of the opera because it is one of operas biggest spectacle reference and expectation which is the burning, sacrifice and murder of innocent people as sport fuelled by the King as a reminder of people's position, control and power of the Church. I built it into the set, so that the set was at its most powerful configuration yet simplest and it was basically the multi-levelled walls opened and through the research through woodcuts of the past that is exactly what would have happened. We would see people put into yellow garments, put onto a bonfire, burnt and so we gave an image of that and had that whole world burning with the giant metal cross above the Church and above the King and even that was on fire.

DEATH OF A SALESMAN (ROYAL EXCHANGE, MANCHESTER)

D: Willy Loman's journey is very intense and throughout you feel his tensions and stresses. How did you represent his journey through the set and costume? What does the tree represent and what was it like to design in-the-round with an audience spectating from all sides?

L: The Royal Exchange gives you so much already, the audience is in-the-round and the audience are very close and you have the ability to make it feel like a community experience where everyone is there in it together. But also, is very magical of this incredible space that it makes you feel like you are the only person watching it. You could watch and feel involved or take it passively like a bystander which is extraordinary. It was a thrill for me to work in this space. It was one the first theatre spaces I visited as a child and where I fell in love with theatre through it because it broke through the idea of the proscenium. It is unique, the audience comes in through the same entrances as the Actors and leave the same way.

Interestingly through the play and through different times, we follow through a man's life and we finish the story at the point of his death that he will die within the time of the production and we will be at his funeral. We were able to play with people entering the space from behind the audience and coming into focus through scenes they might not be in. Memory is not linear and can dig and points out parts of the past, and so with a kaleidoscope of memory it made it very exciting to think of the space in this way. My job was to curate how the space and it was wonderful to work with Sarah Frankcom, who was also the Artistic Director of the Royal Exchange and understood the potential of that space. I had already done a production of Twelfth Night there and had a wonderful time exploring it and it is great to go back in with what this piece could be. I wanted to also create a space of naturalism and if you read Arthur Miller's stage directions, he sets it up as a dream landscape with things coming in then going away again. You read also about the garden, the house and the bedrooms not being walled spaces. There is a strong thing in the piece with Willy Loman's desire to touch nature where we he lived once had greenery and suddenly the city was building on and up around him, crushing

his life but where he dreamt of a garden. There is a constant reference back to nature and the man-made life that Willy is caught up within, the catalyst system of the American dream.

The world has not really change with the desire for money, how human beings are expendable when they are no longer at the top of their game and scabble round of the material possessions that hold dear. We see that Willy's world is coming to an end and the set I wanted to create a set as a circular metal container like a silo, an object for a piece of nature that would hang over and above the whole audience. The bottom of the container has fallen to the ground or at least it seems to have fallen to the ground with the idea that beneath it is the earth. In the centre of the steel hard surface floor that with a lip where actors could sit on, there is an inner plug that was taken off after the interval with the idea of raw. The idea of the forest expresses time itself and how through the piece the set works as an installation and when you work at the Exchange it is a box of tricks, but Sarah did not want to use any of them. She wanted to find another language and find the space in a new way. So rather than having pieces of set going on, it was about finding the inner story and so this forest, this emblem of nature through the piece, descended like a time machine, like sand in an hourglass, whether the nature would lower into filling the space to the point where Willy, once the plug in the centre of the stage is removed, he is pathetically raking around that this thing is almost contacting him. A single object can tell us where we are like a table with a recorded became an office that allowed scene changes to happen more fluidly.

We wanted the costumes to evoke the period or explicitly say who someone was but not be alien to us as the story of the Salesman is very relevant in a heavy woollen flannel, tired looking fabric that would be a fabric for an working everyman who spends his life driving and carrying around samples. We never know exactly what he does, we just know he is selling something, and he is not selling very much of it. I also wanted everyone to be dressed as though it was for the last day of his life so it could be quite acceptable that he would be wearing the very clothes he would be buried in. Ben, the more successful brother, who is dressed in a more softer double-breasted suit and I wanted to avoid the cliché for Linda as he American housewife and this is very true about the props and everything, I wanted to avoid costume wise, prop wise and set wise any idea of a comic American image where it starts off with this is the fridge they should have and avoid it being glamorous and for it to feel very every day, so I wanted to avoid Linda to be the ordinary housewife who would in a pinny, the Doris Day image, to be more interesting so I put her in a grey, functional almost unitarian dress that gave the suggestion that Linda had another dimension to her that she could be lighter. It is a very character but there is a lightness under the surface, so the dress could move, and she could forget herself and go into a slight dance and the bottom of the skirt could move in a less juddery way. We move backwards and forwards in time when we meet Biff and Happy who, at the beginning of the Play, we meet as men and are suited and not under the jurisdiction of their father anymore. Where they are still looking to him for guidance, but their relationship is very difficult, and love is not expressed. We go back to their youth and to do this very quickly with the same actors, we had to underdress and the idea of a vest being a boyish look for Biff and the idea of a baseball glove instantly suggests youth. So, we used props and costumes to help the performers themselves to make these changes in a place in history.

© The Scenographer 2020