



A Portrait of Strassberger

Interview by Dana Pinto

Thaddeus Strassberger is an American Opera Director and Scenic Designer who lives in London, UK. Here, Strassberger offer us a glimpse into what it is like to take on the role as both Director and Designer, with insight into his approach and his relationship to the production.

PINTO: When reading the score and the libretto, how do you come to deciding the approach you will take? Can you give us a couple of examples. And what is the impact you wish to leave the audience with?

STRASSBERGER: What interests me about opera, design and production in general, in a way, I have had more time to reflect on it over all of this time. And it is because when you're just doing it all the time, I do like maybe five or six new productions a year, you just enjoy creating it and you do not stop to question what it is. So this question comes at a timely point, because I have been thinking about why and now I have a lot more time to think about those things before I have to sort of dive in and meet a deadline.

So, just before the pandemic I was working on a production at Landestheater in Innsbruck Austria which is a theatre I have worked in five or six times before and I have a good relationship with the ensemble and the whole technical team. And I was thinking about this piece, why does it need to be done now? I have worked in Russia a great deal and I know of the contemporary Russian politics, how it is affecting people's lives, the status of their leadership, the status of the democracy, their cultural life and how things are working between the state and the people.

It is all fascinating and what is a huge advantage of being in the position that I do not get to not just visit places on holiday. I have been to Moscow and St. Petersburg, but you go over and over again, and you are really working with people, you are invited into their homes, and there in their working everyday lives. You meet people from all different walks of life, you're meeting the bigwigs and then you're meeting all the people in the theatre that has 900 employees, you know, and you come into contact with everybody.

And so, what I'm interested in is taking all of that experience that I have in life that I find super interesting, as from an observational point of view, but then what do I do with that information and where does it ground? How does it touch the earth? Otherwise, all I have are these observations, thoughts and opinions. I find that through these operas, I end up with themes in my mind, in my real life, considering how does that apply? I can then focus it all together that gives me a kind of satisfaction and I don't have these sort of loose wires sparkling all the time in my head.

So for example, it is really about thinking of the theme of the opera and when you first read it and say it is set at the turn of the 16th 17th century, with the time of the troubles in Russia where they have elected a new leader, but it's not really an election. It is as though the government told them who to vote for. And you are thinking that this is what The Guardian newspaper is talking about all the time and this is what all my friends talk about. But, what are the qualities that you want in a Leader? Do you want somebody that is a good listener? Or do you want somebody that is iron fisted that will put things in order. And then I started realising that maybe I am not interested in 1604 or the politics in Russia, but I do find the aesthetic of all of those things very interesting as a student of art history, paintings and architecture and things that you want to touch. But then you start thinking that these thoughts, things that you read in the paper, what you hear on TV or you see on a tweet there, is downright Medieval.

People talking about *"we should just have the death penalty because that would solve our problems"* or *"all of these immigrants just need to go because they're creating all of the problems"* and *"the foreigners that have invaded our lands"*. But you are thinking, we are not as advanced and enlightened as we think but we are living in modern Medieval times. When you really thinking about the consequences of Brexit, Trump and border troubles, and belongs in a cage. So, then you go to the news in Russia, and you see people in the dock in a court room. They are in a cage, and you think that this is the same thing as like a Medieval prison. It is strange and I started putting all this together then realised the theme for production is as though we are living in modern Medieval times.

So, what does that look like? We have all of our history up to 2022 that we can all on from technology, hairstyles, fashion and materials, but yet fundamentally you turn on the television and see the Pope who is wearing old robes just as though it is straight out of the 16th century. Or, you turn on the television, and you look at the Royal family with the Horse guards parade and you are wondering what period is this from? It is then that you realise that you do not have to make a period production, like a documentary, and you do not have to make an updated in modern production where everybody is wearing high street fashion but then realise that this is modern Medieval. And so, how does this relate to the production? How do I through all of the design elements to make a point? So, maybe this isn't happening right now, but like 'The Handmaid's Tale' or something that is completely looking into the past. All these decisions do not become easier, with the million details you have to figure out, but you just start to know where to look and where to ground all the information. And then it's so exciting because every single line of text or

every interlude in the music, you are thinking how do I reinforce the idea of this dialogue that we have with the past and with our present.

P: Now and again, there will be a Director that will also design the same production. But you have the staggering ability to also explore lighting and video design in your repertoire. What are the benefits and challenges in being Director, Scenic and Costume Designer on your productions?

S: Well, one of the disadvantages that I feel acutely all of the time like when I am reading like The Scenographer Magazine or looking at other people's Instagram pages or anything, I look at many stunning images that other Designers have made, and I have an envy feeling that they are so talented to put these beautiful things onto the stage. But then what I realised that much of that has to do with my relationship as being a Director, because I think that I'm always as a Designer, in-service to how the story is going to play out with the people in it and there is a primary plane that I put the relationships that the people have with their environment.

And often times, I think we are only six feet tall maximum and you can only weigh so much maximum and so you can only take up so much space. So to me, there is a limit for how you can interact with a space in a way that feels human scaled, physically while emotionally, you may have thoughts, fears, hopes and dreams that are coming out. But for me, there's something about rooting the reality of the human experience together with an environment. And sometimes I think that keeps me so I see like a big beautiful set and feel unsure how long this will maintain a stunning image. And of course the metaphor is so strong, so clear and exciting for example you may have a huge crucifix on stage, so you understand that the church is important, but then there is only so many ways you can touch the crucifix, lean on the crucifix, bleed on the crucifix so yes it is a symbol and I've got it but it never goes back to that feeling and I don't want something that looks like a crime, procedural drama where everything is gritty and so real, that you think, well, television does that better and why are we in the opera house? So, there is real tension back and forth. And I think what I tried to do with that is to create big images that twist and contract in a way that you do not lose the human. Because often when I see these pictures of big productions, I'll go watch the video or see it live and that it is a great idea but actually, the Director and the Designer, had a big idea in the beginning, but mostly the singers are just standing in front of it.

I am always thinking about how the set is going to be used, how it reveals and how it transforms in time. I really love the movement of big things and with scenery, lights and video whether I designed them all there or not but that they are integrated in such a way that you are not aware. What it should be is "what an amazing moment". For example if you thought the whole set was collapsing down or was the set actually on hydraulics and moving? Was the video, the lights or the people doing something? And so, with all of those elements together, the only thing that matters to me is that you thought the whole set collapsed and this is my magic trick from my toolbox. And by working on those different elements then I can mould those moments together.

When a company a theatre approaches me and ask whether I would want to create the sets, costumes or lights, I then say well let me think about it. I think about the title and I'll hold the dates while I figure this out for about a week or ten days or so. If it is a piece that I am already familiar with, I will have many thoughts about it but then maybe somebody may offer me something like 'Greek Passion' in Russia, which I would have never heard before. For example, with costume designs, I really like things that are modern, and that I can like twist things that are already existing like say sampling from real life. So then it's a much more about like sourcing costumes, buying things and then modifying them and I am comfortable with that. However, if I want that is from a distinctive period with like proper tailoring and cuts and fabrics, I don't have the skills or the training in that but if I want to do something in exactly the year 1705 then I know the Designer to call upon to do it. He would know what underwear they were wearing and whether if something was fashionable or reference a social class or society.

P: And when you are creating the lighting and video design for a production, how do you make all these aspects work so beautifully together?

S: This is the same for lighting design as it has a lot to do with the time that you have in the theatre, I love lighting and the collaboration with a Lighting Designer. So for me, it's about finding the way to maximise the amount of time that you have to interact with the lights. So in a lot of repertory situations where you do not have that many hours on stage, or days on stage, working with a really good Lighting Designer is great, because then you can be like superfast, it is shorthand, and you can talk about things in the meetings before and know that you're going to be able to achieve it in this short amount of time. It is then when it is really exciting. But if I have a longer rehearsal period, where I am in Russia, I get three or four weeks on stage, then I do not bring on a Lighting Designer as the theatre wouldn't pay them enough to be there for the four weeks. A busy good Lighting Designer would not want to sit in Russia to do 15 days of lighting spread over two months. So, then I'll do it myself as I am not pressured with the time and I have more time to experiment. This opens me up the possibilities of not having it all worked out on paper but to be able to say "Hey, guys, let's hang this light here to see what that feels like". For me, it is about maximising the amount of time that I have with each of the elements.

P: What are your design techniques in communicating your concept to others? i.e. model box, SketchUp, storyboarding. Do you begin with the white-card model? And at what point, do you stop 'designing'?

T: We are always and constantly evolving along with our techniques are. And I actually learned a lot from the Assistants and Associates that I hired because they are often younger than me by a decade or two and they come in with new software and new techniques. There is a young lady that I work with that does stop motion films and is very detailed with her models of furniture, figures and objects. So when I bring her in to do some models, she is in the studio making beautiful models and three dimensional things. She is very good at creating realist interiors such as sofas and curtains so then, like a real 3D model can be really helpful to touch. But then if I am creating epic piece, then you know I work with people who are familiar with Rhino and other 3D software. It all comes back to how things move in time. With 3D software, you can animate and pre-imagine how things will go. But almost always, I will make a scale model and start with making some sort of white card model as a way of getting our hands into it, not be precious and even cut into it with a scapel then draw on it. I then move into the actual finished model with everything worked out, laser cut it and you can invest the time and the money into it. Lighting in the video becomes the third step and some people do not do. I would take photographs of the model, and then I do all of the lighting but I do it in Photoshop. I do not approach it with in virtual reality where the lights are really doing theatrical lights but I think of it more as a painting like an old master kind of painting I play with the light, the shadow, the smoke, the colour palette, the textures and the saturation to create the feeling and the atmosphere. In the models, I do not put in every blade of grass or even all the furniture in or light fixtures, but I add all of that in Photoshop afterwards to achieve a hybrid collage. It is not just a 'dollhouse' 1:25 scale model but it is a model for talking to the construction workshop.

Working around the world all the time, the model ends up becoming this relic that is important and you have to figure out how to fit in an aeroplane and get it to Beijing. However, if you have really good photographs that are all completely done into like a storyboard, that is together in a presentation using InDesign of 10 or 50 pages then at least you have if you know if British Airways smashes your model, at least you've got it documented and it could be viewed on a Zoom call and update it very quickly. So that document, whether I am the Designer, or Director, or doing them all then this document becomes a reference point that is sent to everyone on the team including

the Costume Designer, Lighting Designer or video Designer. It is a visual because talking can be dangerous as everybody can have a slightly different understanding of the words but I encourage sending visuals and research.

P: Contemporary Operas, such as ‘Glare’ at the Royal Opera House, must have its challenges when being rivalled to the classics. How do Contemporary Operas compare to traditional operas? And, what are the advantages to having the Composer onsite? What is the relationship of Composer and Director?

S: I have done several world premieres. I also did one called ‘Silent Light’ at Banff Centre in Canada last year, and ‘JFK’, which was a big world premiere. And I think it's interesting because you have access to the actual impulse that was originally wanted, to be able to question and interact with it. And often at times you find certain things are intellectually rigorously thought out that are very clear and then there are other things that are instinctive. As a Designer and a Director, it is similar in that we have a plan and a scheme and other ideas are just pure inspiration. This is the same with a Composer, where they may have written this beautiful transition but do not know what it would look like or what it would feel like. So, here we are really looking for impact. But if they suggest, I believe it is important that this character is in a bathtub for Act One, then you can say, “Well, why is it important that they're in the bathtub?” and then then you just know. You can then help them to look at what are the possibilities of theatre, because oftentimes, they are more Musicians from a Conservatory space and although they go to the theatre as a spectator, they may be not fully experience making theatrical events. So sometimes I find it helpful that you have to really push them to say, let's do something more spectacular here.

P: What do you believe contemporary operas are moving towards? What does the future hold for new operas?

S: We tend to romanticise the past and sort of turn what's happening now into like, sort of a crisis and a problem. But actually, everything is precedented. I spend a lot of time reading, when I'm working on my favourite Composers like Verdi, reading so many of the letters and correspondence between the publishers and the theatres, and I believe that exactly what happens today is exactly what's always happened. Politics, race and gender identity and all of these things have always been in place. In Verdi's ‘Rigoletto’, he was completely banned saying “You can't have a disabled person on stage with a humpback. People come to the opera to see nice, beautiful operas”. There are many operas now dealing with race and trans rights issues and it has always been part of the dialogue. I just like to keep making really good work and keep contributing. Every opera that was ever made from Monteverdi to Mozart to Puccini was a contemporary work at one point. They are contemporary operas because they were written by real people in real time and the operas do not exist until they are on stage and being performed. So if we're going to do a Wagner opera now, it's a contemporary work because there are real people in a room singing with real people playing real instruments now, and that didn't exist 10 minutes ago until somebody said, let's do this opera. So I just think our role is to make everything we do fresh, contemporary and thoughtful.

P: As an American born, living in London with experience working in many countries, how do you compare the production process? For example, in the UK within the team there is a Production Manager that is not to be found in other countries.

S: Every theatre is completely different and it is loosely based on country. China operates in one way, Russia, America, Scandinavia has its own system in how they do things. Germany and Austria have a similar way of interacting while Italy has a whole other way of approaching the production process. It is the curse of knowledge in that we have this idea of what best practice is because it is

built up in our head having cherry picked all of the good parts of every system. In our minds, we believe that every theatre should be like this and not have the unproductive parts, however this is counterproductive, inefficient and frustrating. Having a Production Manager would be great but what I do appreciate is when a theatre has a single contact that you can really trust and that they are cross-checking all the information. A Production Manager filters all the information and flags up any concerns, that person is a real partner in crime in making sure the bigger picture is working.

P: We have all been impacted by the Covid19 and we are beginning to see and feel signs of coming out of this pandemic. With social distancing remaining in place for the immediate future, how will be impact your immediate future productions? Have you been considering how you may approach your future productions bearing in mind of social distancing etc?

S: We have not been in a theatre for more than a year, performances have been cancelled and postponed. I was meant to go to Austria at the end of this month, but are hotels or restaurants open? Can I get into and out of the country? What if all of this changes day-by-day or hour-by-hour? It is frustrating because you cannot plan for anything and this creates anxiety. I have had productions that were already built but are now in a skip. These performances will never happen. Financially, the big hit is that the theatre bought and paid for the scenery, I did not get my full fee and the performance never happens.

People have underestimated what it was going to be like but we should be back on stage this summer, next Fall, in the springtime or outdoors, or we will do social distancing or sell 50% of seats. And so when you are dealing with so many different countries, different rules, regulations, quarantine, visas being cancelled and so I cannot go to Germany for a day and come back to the UK and to have another meeting with the 10 days quarantine for every meeting. This financial model completely falls apart and it is tricky. There are many Designers and Directors here in the UK and there is no work here, but I have my life here and it has always been easy to come and go. It has crystallised the fact that live entertainment is very different than non-live entertainment and I value that as well as feel that our lives have improved by sharing the experience by being in the same room by vibrating with the same molecules, the collective experience that is different from Zoom, Netflix and all of which are super handy and can augment what we do. But smelling different things, eating different foods, making space for going to the theatre, if you have to hire a babysitter and pay for a dinner and park your car, then buy tickets and all this to go to a show, which is what 90% of the world does then you are consuming content in a different way but making it special. It is an investment of your time, money and thoughts. We need this. As creators of the work, we have to make something that is worthy of that investment that the public is making in us and that is where there is responsibility.

P: Can you talk about your direction and design for Puccini's *'La Fanciulla del West'* at NCPA Beijing in 2019? And how the set moves to give the audience new dimensions and your play of textures between the man-made and natural environments?

S: What is interesting of Puccini's *'La Fanciulla del West'* is that I have directed and designed this three times, I've actually done it three times three completely different productions, one of which was at the Opera of Montreal where I was an American Director making my debut and this idea that it is an American piece that has Native American themes with me being a member of the Cherokee tribe also, it felt more so connected to the land, themes of sensitivity with a colonial way of looking at things. From there, I was offered the role at Tiroler Landestheater in Innsbruck in 2011.

In China, they were looking for just some new Directors who could invigorate their season to do things differently. The excitement of working in Beijing is that they had this brand new theatre at only 10 years old with a huge infrastructure investment into the Arts, budget of the country, incredible technology in the way the stage can revolve and go up and down, with all of the automated fly bars, good lighting systems, good musical education inside, the orchestra is amazing and the chorus was really good. There were mostly Italians in the main principal roles and an Italian Conductor was brought in. Many of the local roles were sung by local singers in which many of them have gone to Italy to study because of course opera in one sense is an Italian art form. Even some of the technical staff have studied in theatres in Italy and so the working language in the NCPA in Beijing is Italian. Often English is the base language around the world such as Scandinavia or Russia.

The brief was something that is never been seen before it was the only theatre I think I've ever been to where after the initial they asked to make more and have more impact. What was interesting dramaturgically, is that it began hardly minimalistic, but became more complex. They did understand that Act One was more simpler but at the audience were unfamiliar with the piece and the structure of the piece, they wanted to grab their attention with some interesting images right from the very beginning. Although, it went against my initial instinct about the piece, we became more creative about how to figure out to make a bigger impact and the need to exploit all of the possibilities of this space. I wanted to use all of the things that the theatre could do. There was lateral movement, spinning movement, up and down movement, multiple ways of moving and I wanted to be able to do that. I was then looking at all of these old silver daguerreotype photographs and things that were soft but shiny. So I found a way on stage to kind of bring these old photographs to life through the set, and that was really interesting, because it wasn't naturalistic at all, even though the setting was real nature, it was filtered through historic lens. And that was really fun to develop these like techniques like all of the trees for example, they were painted like a really glossy black, but then had silver leaf applied on them.

I played a lot with smoke and haze then brought in a Video Designer that I've worked with in the past before and who is also Filmmaker. We took many photographs, video and film footage of the scenery with the real lighting in situ. We then projected the images of the scenery onto itself. I wanted to create the movement when you move a photograph it flashes in one place and it goes dark to super dark in another. So, we took the video but we inverted the image then all of a sudden on stage it has this very different quality to it, so started playing around with this movement.

The trees in the forest are several metres tall some look like they're going left and others are going right. We used the actual footage of these spinning trees as rear projection and front projection moving more slowly creating a feeling of walking through a forest.

P: Your version of *'Carmen'* at the Danish National Opera is a modern interpretation. Here, you took on the roles as Director, Scenic and Costume Designer. What was your source of inspiration for this piece?

S: This was a touring production that had to fit in about 20 different venues from a village hall, proper theatres to a sports arena. We had a rig that could fit in every single venue and that did not have to interact with the venue itself. Normally, you could be concerned about the colour of the seats in the auditorium or how bright the orchestra pit is, but here you do not have control over all of those things. So you end up being able to really focus it down to this diorama, a one set wonders. If you do not have the ability to create change scenes then you have to come up with an environment that is interesting enough to last three hours of an evening.

Often on these big productions they spend millions of dollars on and we still do not know what they are smuggling in *'Carmen'*, so I thought, well, let's raise the stakes and what if they are human smugglers which one feels like the most repugnant or distasteful way. But by setting in a modern setting in order to make all of these different locations. *'Carmen'* has a lot of overtures preludes

and instrumental moments and so there is time to tell a story that is not text based. So, in the beginning, I had the whole thing set up, where we did the final scene as the opening scene where she gets murdered or not murdered and there is a big fight. The whole thing starts off as this interrogation of the main culprit.

The costumes were sourced locally in the high streets with a big Middle Eastern community in Denmark there were charity shops full of Romany Gypsy, saris and kaftans, Eastern European babushka wraps and textures. I had seven weeks of rehearsal and the costume workshops were onsite. For me, the costume fitting was not to go next door for half an hour, have your fitting and then come back and we will continue to rehearse the opera. We spent two hours with each character. So even though it looks like t-shirts, jeans, hoodies and sweatpants, there is still many alterations that go into it, to get the fit, and then a lot of distressing to go into it such as washing and dipping.

P: Puccini's *'Turandot'* at the Theater Augsburg (201) took place in an outdoor theatre space. What was it like to direct and co-design the set for *'Turandot'*? What were the challenges you faced in producing an opera outdoors? And what were the attractions?

S: Augsburg it is a very interesting space, because this is old city wall, many overgrown trees and it is very evocative. With a fairly large cast, I had worked there before in the main house and so I knew of the resources. I worked with Madeline Boyd many times before and she designed the costumes and for her with the costumes in the environment and outdoor setting was even more important. Our ideas, colour palette, and she built most of the model with an intricate idea for colours and textures while I was more in charge of the structure and how it was used. The details no matter what the scale is very important to even being very particular about how fingernails are painted or what's written on a letter document because those are the things that the people see. And then they amplify those things when they look at an object that they know is real, that our reaction to it is real, and then it can help them to go further out. I learned how to utilise natural lighting and you know at first the audience will only see in sunlight and then later with the lights and any use of fire.

P: You are also currently working towards an even larger scale production of *'Turandot'* at the Oper im Steinbruch. The epic set by Set Designer Paul Tate de Poo plays with the multiple levels and bridges in this outdoor arena to even the vast width of the staging area is an incredible stage to perform and direct on. How does directing on two outdoor stages, initially at Theater Augsburg then to Oper im Steinbruch compare? What does each stage offer you as a Director and the impact it has on your audiences?

S: On a nine hour flight, Paul Tate de Poo and I talked about some things we might do and we, in some ways, had it worked out mixing reality and fairy-tale together. In Augsburg where it was really like an excavation site, almost like Indiana Jones, pulling out these old artefacts and the terracotta warriors. But to this piece I wanted it to be different and have always been fascinated with models and miniatures. There is this Chinese artistic movement around ivory and carving very intricate lattice work of landscapes and architectural. I loved the natural palette almost the colour of the sandy quarry. And so this idea that this began to be carved out of the environment like an enormous rock behind them that sort of incorporating Jade flowers. But, instead of these things in miniature, let's make it as big as they can be blurring the edges into the environment. It is 10 metres wide and 27 metres tall.

At the Oper im Steinbruch, you have the pre-show, intermission and post-show works, almost all of the audience walks very close to the set. Everybody can see the details up close when as they come in and so by the time they have sat down, then they are already fascinated and during the

interval they are able to inspect it. The theatre also has tours, so you can come an hour before the performance and go on a guided tour backstage as well as onstage.

P: Costume Designer Giuseppe Palella has designed a remarkable set of costumes where the silhouettes and shapes of the costumes, the detail of the print to the micro-detail of the embellishment is astonishing. How will that detail stand against this vast stage? How will this detail impact the audience? And would your direction effect, emphasis and bring out each character and each chorus to unite these incredible designs?

S: For 30 performances and 5000 spectators, you have the opportunity to make something really beautiful. It is not unlimited, we are always still resource managing, and figuring out every single technique from printing fabrics and painting techniques. We can source things from far and wide like Chinese jewellery that is ordered, shipped and arrives three months later. Giuseppe has been collecting during the past year while making masks with a mask maker in Venice. The chorus on stage does not actually sing because they are in a room next door with a microphone, so you have many extras and I only have actors on stage. You cannot use masks that cover the mouth and so we had to do a lot more mask work exploring Ancient Greek theatre. An idea that Giuseppe had to expand 75 performers on stage to have large robes of with classical traditional Chinese sleeves and as the women opened their arms they would be holding masks to make it look like three women. Then you can make it a cluster of 18 faces from just 6 people. Once again, blurring the lines between of what is real.

It is almost like a stadium, we are outdoors and the lighting can be very difficult. It is coming from far away and you do not always have many angles. The lighting has to be weatherproof and deal with the cold as it gets very cold there at night actually. We are using 14 big high definition projectors positioned not just for imagery but also for light. The set is all white and ivory in the beginning with the natural sunlight then the colour changes that by the beginning of Act Two it feels different and it has been brought to life, the way you take like an old sepia photograph and hand paint that with the video. And so with all the colour and the movement of the water, birds, fireflies and butterflies bring a kind of magic.

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