

GARY McCANN

Post-Modern Baroque

By Kate Burnett

Since the 17thC building of European theatres, the stage has been understood as a fantasy space in which structure and abstraction, in the form of light and atmospherics, can come together to create *make-believe*. No surprise then that the ‘post-modern baroque’ designs of Gary McCann were selected as the catalogue cover and poster images for the Society of British Theatre Designers’ (SBTD) national exhibition, *Make/Believe: UK Design for Performance 2011 - 2015* in Nottingham and at the V&A Museum in London in 2015.

The productions selected, from McCann’s wide ranging career of design for theatre, opera, musicals, art installation, interior and event design, were *Die Fledermaus* at Den Norske Opera and Ballet in Oslo (2012), and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* with the Nederlandse Reisopera (2013), both with director Laurence Dale. Both design schemes take familiar architectural styles and motifs with which to ‘set’ the worlds of the operas, but then escalate them into surreal fantasies of intense colour and wit.

McCann’s commentary on his design for *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* references the mix of Baroque and Moorish motifs applied as Gaudi-esque tile fragments to three mobile periaktoids, into which are set openings and chambers. These are accompanied by cobalt blue light-up palm trees. Efficient for touring and solving the opera buffa’s frequent instances of eavesdropping and split scenes, the set is intensely lit (by Richard ten Hof) to create ravishing colour-scapes. The costumes

provide even more contrast with sharp colours, shapes and wigs combining a partytime take on both 18th and 21st century fashions.

Die Fledermaus for Oslo is on a different scale, and best described by McCann: “*The hypercritical, style obsessed Viennese society in Strauss’s operetta is transposed to a modern day New York fashion/ art cross-over scene – where the competition to look good is so fierce that the ball’s guests become grotesque casualties from an avant-garde catwalk show.*”⁽¹⁾

The oversized white neo-classical ‘summer house’ set for Act II, with its brightly coloured flumes is redolent of an art gallery hired by the ultra-rich and gives way in Act 3 to an equally vast prison, made of three tiers of white bars. This rises up through the floor in view of the audience as the previous set, in it’s entirety, slides upstage with the full cast on board. Here, and in other operas such as *Ariadne Auf Naxos* and *La Clemenza di Tito* (discussed later), McCann uses neo-classical architecture and styles of decoration to create narrative and comment, in much the same way that ‘high end’ hotels and yachts (which he has also designed) create ambience and in Noel Coward’s words, *a design for living*. We understand the aspirations, self belief and personal promotion of those who own, even created, these spaces, while we watch them undermined, betrayed, fail, or succeed through fate, misadventure and the very qualities described above. All of these themes are also explored in McCann’s equally fantastical and fastidious costume designs.

In the UK tradition, he usually designs both set and costumes, seeing them as absolutely derived from the same conceptual approach, with essential comment to be made about the *world* they occupy and the characters' relationships with their unfolding narratives. Understanding that we can only see historical styles through our own 21st century eyes, McCann is equally at home researching, plundering and representing period and cultural styles and status, as he is referencing and extending contemporary fashion extremes. His costumes for the ball scene in *Die Fledermaus* are a fabulously eclectic collection of fancy dress-meets-haute couture, with perhaps my favourite of all time - a concertina Christmas paper bell styled dress; funny and playful at the Act 2 ball, one knows it will become a crumpled reject when the night is over...

McCann's use of extreme European fashion styles, whether 18thC, mid/late 19C or 1930's and '80s allows for insightful reinterpretation, conveying aspiration, wealth and power, bedraggled and decayed for those on the way down and wonderfully mixed up for the *wild cards*, the outsiders and the 'contact characters' - those we identify with. His experience of designing for drama as well as opera gives McCann an intuitive understanding of the *realness*, the wearing experience of the performer. In plays such as *Killology* at the Royal Court, London, and *The Pitman Painters* (Live Theatre, Newcastle upon Tyne, National Theatre, Broadway and touring) performers need *clothes* they can inhabit. They may present strong shapes, with colour and details of culture and status, but they need to be at the service of the character. McCann brings this understanding to the singer's need for confidence in the shape, feel and character they are portraying, but also perhaps their greater need for presence, scale and narrative information in what is often a *picture-making* process - frame by

frame. A major part of the opera designer's role is collaboration, but in this they also lead, in making the frames - or *pictures*.

McCann's design process is one of building an architecture in which, at each successive moment, the lone figure, or choreographed chorus complete the space. Through each *picture* the audience's understanding of the narrative, the juxtapositions and layered meanings develop. These are achieved through the proscenium theatre *toolkit* - with scale, altered perspective, reveals and groupings of specifically coloured and styled characters and chorus. McCann and director Christian R ath achieve this in starkly formal settings for both *Macbeth* (2015) and *Der Freisch tzer* (2018) at Wiener Staatsoper.

With director Laurence Dale, McCann has created fabulously vivid choreographies in stylised environments and costume schemes ranging from the post-modern art worlds of *Ariadne Auf Naxos*, and *Die Fledermaus* to the surreal pantomime of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and bleakly sculptural *Madame Butterfly* (2015) also for the Nederlandse Reisopera.

In Dale and McCann's *Madam Butterfly* this fusion of costumed performer and conceptual scenic environment was explored further.

As McCann explains: "*An angled rotating platform forms an "emotional landscape" underscoring the loneliness and abandonment of Cio Cio San, whilst the costumes, co-designed with avant-garde Dutch fashion designer Winde Rienstra, combine heavily textured organic raw silks with futuristic wooden garments.*

The production was unusually minimal for me: Laurence and I deliberately stripped the stage back to an angled plane hovering and rotating in an illuminated space. Without layering on pseudo-Chinoiserie - sliding paper screens and so on - the devastating rawness of the narrative came more clearly into focus."

Gary McCann trained in Theatre Design at Nottingham Trent University under the inspirational, radical theatre director and writer Malcolm Griffiths. The course was taught by practising designers with a strong emphasis on turning out collaborative, problem solving designer-makers. This approach, while fastidiously craft centred was/is also passionately aligned with storytelling, working with, and advancing, narrative.

Coming from Northern Ireland, much of McCann's early work was with the Lyric Theatre in Belfast. Here and with Live Theatre in Newcastle-upon-Tyne he worked on new plays, which were essential in developing the habit of listening carefully to the unfolding of freshly written, still changing narratives and working closely with director and actors on how to put *this* story and *these* characters on stage for the first time. The most notable of these plays, particularly those with directors Max Roberts and Rachel O'Riordan, have transferred to London's West End and toured extensively in the UK and abroad.

Of these, *The Pitman Painters*, written by Lee Hall (who also wrote *Billy Elliott*) for Live Theatre, is based on the true story of a 1934 group of Northumberland coal miners taking a course in art appreciation at their local WEA (Workers Education Association). In frustration they take up art themselves and for a brief period, ending in World War II, they achieve status and regard as the Ashington (Colliery) Group. McCann's 2007 designs achieved the difficult balance of placing this period narrative while focusing almost entirely on the development of the characters and the art work they look at and make. McCann describes how: "*In keeping with Live Theatre's Socialist programming agenda, the production drew from a Brechtian aesthetic, equating the unadorned black walls of an empty theatre stage with the blackness that surrounds the miners working at the coalface.*

Light, and projections of the artists evolving artworks, literally and metaphorically illuminate the darkness."

He goes on to comment on how this hugely successful production was, "*an extraordinary journey – in the span of a few short years it took me from working on the stages of small regional theatres in the UK to the National Theatre, London, Broadway, and the West End.*"

In the mid 2000s McCann had also started to design small scale touring opera, having previously assisted other opera designers. From 2007-11 he taught a postgraduate Theatre Design course in the Drama Department at the University of Kent. There he replaced the outgoing Professor Christopher Baugh who had been part of the Kent Interactive Digital Design Studio (KiDDS), an important research base looking back at Craig and Appia's work and forward into the fast developing use of gaming software for theatre design purposes. Whilst at Kent, McCann was able to engage in digital modelling training. He further honed these skills through commissions to design the interiors of a new range of super yachts built in Turkey. Digital visualisation of the, as yet unbuilt, boats was industry standard and an essential skill he needed to refine.

By 2011 McCann was writing, of his designs for Bellini's *Norma* at the National Theatre of Moldova in Chisinau, that his entire process had been "*...conducted by digital means. Costumes were photo-shopped collages and the set designs originated as models generated in Cinema 4D.*"⁽²⁾

The techniques of digitally researching, assembling and collaging are evident in the way McCann describes the aesthetic he generates: "*Bellini's setting of ancient Gaul under Roman occupation is updated to a modern day war zone. Bullet holes punctuate the walls that frame the space, the sacred grove of the Druids is a charred, skeletal forest and the great head of the god Irminsul lies abandoned on the parched, blackened landscape.*

Costumes were inspired by science fiction illustrator Enki Bilal.” (ibid)

His reference points are therefore taken from modern aesthetics, technologies and cultures but comment on, and connect with, the timelines of both story and original 19th century opera composition. It is noticeable here that the brooding atmosphere McCann builds in his digital renderings with directional light and shading into black is a key feature of his visualisation technique. It is also applied to individual costume designs, so that characters appear to be filmic, unsettlingly real.

As a designer McCann sees it as essential to bring something to first discussions with the director so that *the journey* can take off.

He talks illuminatingly about the process of *getting a concept*, working often with elaborate opera librettos and mythological plots which seem initially remote, but nearly always come down to the fallibility of human nature. In asking, of an opera or play now, “*What drives it? Where is it going, what does it need to do?*” he looks to the structure of the piece, as does British designer Richard Hudson, who, similarly talks about the importance of solving scene changes because they drive the visual narrative in the way that they transition: “*It is vital for a designer to think about the set changes and the way a set is revealed and taken away from the audience... the set changes (are) also part of the design solution.*”⁽³⁾

McCann is also clearly fascinated by theatre technology, - the proscenium *box of tricks* that facilitates plot dynamics. As Professor Christopher Baugh comments: “*Technologies may have meaning in and of themselves and are not simple servants to the mechanistic needs of scenic representation. They are expressions of a relationship with the world and reflect complex human values and beliefs. Our thinking, our philosophies and modes of expression and understanding of humanity have been*

frequently governed by current technology and the capabilities of machinery.”⁽⁴⁾

McCann’s large-scale set designs for *Macbeth* and *Der Freischütz* both at the Wiener Staatsoper (2018, 2015) demonstrate the movement and configurations of structures and spaces that he creates in order to drive, emotionally and symbolically, the shifts in place, time, mythology and atmospherics required in these contrasting narratives. He describes his *Macbeth* set design as a: “*Post Appia, ever-evolving set - a machine that drives the story, revealing a range of claustrophobic spaces; the forms and volumes created becoming ever more complex as the tragedy unfolds.*”

The oppressively blank concrete military bunker walls separate into towers, the vertical lines broken only by the lit diagonals of internal staircases, all dwarfing the huddled masses below them.

Nina Dunn, who designed the video for the production, adds animated apocalyptic skies at the end of McCann’s perspectives, including a gargantuan solar eclipse. She also creates more insidious effects, such as *fake shadows* which support the supernatural elements in the narrative.

The set for *Der Freischütz* is equally huge in scale, but with a far more stylised series of Perspex panelled thresholds that enable reflection and projection to apparently extend them into infinity.

The central pastoral folk tale is, in this production, also framed with the device of tormented composer, thus combining Weber’s own 19th century perspective theatre (and its capacity for raised, lowered and lateral sliding scenic elements) with the dislocated imagery of contemporary Romantic Caspar David Friedrich and the surrealism of Magritte. McCann describes the necessary and intense collaboration between himself, projection and video designer Nina Dunn and Lighting Designer Thomas Hase: “*I am very interested in forced perspective...*

You can see numerous examples of it in my designs. This, however, was one of the more extreme examples. The set is 16m deep, with an extreme rake. It was an interesting challenge to explore the use of front and rear projection to such a strong degree. The upstage screen became a blank canvas for lighting and projections; they made up half of the stage design.”⁽⁵⁾

Dunn comments: *“All my work comes from what the design is. Gary created this magic box, and the idea was that, throughout the opera, we would be blurring the boundaries between reality and unreality. It could open up to become a forest, a tunnel, or, perhaps, just tricks of one’s mind.”*⁽⁵⁾

Like McCann, Hase describes the set as: *“...like a holodeck, a place that could be constantly transformed. We go from theatre seats to trees that come in and out; the seats are very worn, and the trees grow up through them. The costuming suggests the faded glories of Vienna society watching the show. We went through the show, doing transformations for each scene, with Nina adding scenic effects with her projections.”*⁽⁵⁾

The technologies involved in conceiving and collaborating on such a range of visual effects are core to McCann’s working methods, skills and vision. These can possibly be summarised as:

a) the development of strong working - and continuing - partnerships with directors, lighting designers and video/effects designers;

b) his skill and commitment to digital design process and visualisation techniques in order to create sophisticated, flexible working tools and materials that benefit the performers as well as the entire creative and production teams.

The extent to which McCann uses digital methods perhaps feels more related to the completeness of gaming worlds and scenarios. In the world of gaming, those scenes can seamlessly morph into the next impossible environment on screen, but McCann’s renderings need to travel even further on stage, acquiring actual presence, holding out a promise of being inhabited by real people in real

time. They link back to the extraordinary renderings of 18th century scenic designer De Louthembourg as well as 20th C American designers such as Mielziner. What he is also supplying in the many layers of these digital images, is the technical information of 3D structures that will directly inform the construction and scenic workshops. McCann is very clear that, for him: *“The digital models have firmly supplanted the physical white card models. They are much faster to create and bear significantly greater resemblance to the final constructed sets. I can sit with a director in front of my large iMac screen and shrink the sets horizontally by 3%, try out different surface textures and lighting stages, see sets rise, fall, revolve, transform. The Cinema 4D digital models are in fact fully to scale within the program – I can zoom in on a pinhead in the digital models if I like. I also possess a powerful 3D printer so these digital models can become physical at the press of a button (followed by a few hours waiting for the machine to do it’s work).”*

Two further productions demonstrate the formal and transformable structures that McCann visualises. *Ariadne Auf Naxos*, for the Nederlandse Reisopera, with director Laurence Dale (2018) is set in an art gallery – a self conscious playground of the wealthy with huge garlanded Greek heads on plinths.

These give way to *Ariadne’s* rocky island with projected wide screen Wagnerian seascape beyond, that transforms and recolours as emotions get out of control. The success of this design was influential in McCann being asked to design *La Clemenza di Tito* in neo-classical style for Opéra de Lausanne. Here a sybaritic take on Rome and Emperor Tito’s court plays out against malachite green marble walls, with a vast suspended ceiling above.

A central circular pool is echoed in the translucent panel that lowers and tilts in the ceiling above. Looming abstracted figures watch over the betrayals, the fire and reconciliations.

One figure falls, walls close, the ceiling closes down,

the circular panel tilts like a massive lens, the second act space is engulfed by an avalanche of black ash. Baroque/Fascistic uniforms, and a range of 20th century evening dress set the privilege and power that the original commission to Mozart was required to celebrate.

These designs, like many others of McCann's, include ceilings over at least part of the set. They complete the world of this stage box and give him the opportunity to control light in a variety of ways. He adds, "*The ceilings fulfil a variety of functions for me – they give me complete control over what the audience see, so that beyond the proscenium the illusion of a theatrical world is complete. They concentrate the energy of the performers - and most importantly in opera performances offer an excellent acoustic surface, projecting the voices out into the auditorium.*"

In other designs, the audience's eyes are not tempted upwards to complete *the world*, but are pulled back down to the hectic crowds and human passions on stage.

For the atmospheric *Carmen* at Opera Philadelphia with director Paul Curran (2018, and at Seattle Opera in 2019), skeletal structures of advertising hoardings provide galleries for chorus and create perspectived alleys past evocative Hispanic buildings. These structures – like the temporary stage glamour of the gilded panels of *La Traviata* (also with Paul Curran at Opera Philadelphia) are '*all surface*' with stage braces behind them. They are the make-believe worlds of the 'have-nots', and 'wanna-be's incomplete, temporary, both atmospheric and tawdry. Curran and McCann are regular collaborators and their productions are noted for an energised, filmic immediacy. Both share backgrounds in Scotland and Northern Ireland that are owned as firmly working class. Considering his other professional partnership. McCann notes that his work with Laurence Dale is typified by a witty imaginativeness, while productions with Christian R ath tend to an austere psychological

complexity. Alongside his design partnerships in opera and theatre, McCann has designed several musicals for Bill Kenright, one of the most prolific and effective touring producers in the UK. *The Sound of Music* (2015), *Cilla* (2017), *Saturday Night Fever* (2018) and *La Cage Aux Folles* (2016) have propelled McCann into another performance style in which the focus is always *out front*. Dialogue and movement are presented and choreographed in styles reminiscent of music hall, sharing all with the audience intimately – or with high kicks. The proscenium and echoing upstage frame are, often a major part of the set – as in *La Cage Aux Folles*. Set with lights, they draw the audience in by revealing a variety of locations - and push them out again with chorus *line-ups* right down stage. This is a discipline McCann relishes, partly because the subject matter is often – as he comments about *La Cage Aux Folles*, '*...ideologically subversive within a glittery rainbow coloured package*'; also because the intense logistics of touring musicals take immense discipline and collaboration, in particular with lighting designers, costume makers and wardrobe teams.

McCann emphasises the importance for him of incorporating lighting design into the digital process of building/visualising 3D spaces in order to see '*how light will function*' in them, and to experiment with how moving structures may be reconfigured by light and shadow. He describes how his relationship with 'studio time' is very different now.

He is able to digitally research, sample, download, interpret, integrate and build in layers that enable a huge amount of flexibility and reworking of ideas, proportions, details, etc. "*I find I can get very complete clear ideas out of my head into the digital world very effectively and fast. I imagine spaces (as you would see them - lit, atmospheric) and then aim to communicate them - as clearly.*"

This precision in digital building eventually produces

an actual 3D model for the production teams and the clarity and information from beginning to end shows in the final realised stage sets.

He cites *The Golden Cockerel* for Santa Fe (again with director Paul Curran, 2017) as an illustration of being able to build and experiment digitally with structures that would be difficult, time consuming and probably frustrating in actual model form until they have been refined and stabilised. This set is made up of curved metal frames clad with a perforated aluminium surface through which the supporting frames can be seen. The framing $\frac{3}{4}$ circles upstage, with gradually widening arcs coming down stage, respond to the curves, views and sunsets of the extraordinary Santa Fe space. This floating transparent surface creates a magical fantasy world once it is transformed by the lighting and projection that travel across and through it. In direct and deliberate contrast to the precise, metallic Futurist-inspired scenic forms, McCann's costumes are a riot of colour and outsized digitally-printed Russian patterns.

While control is clearly a large part of this design process - all the way from concept to final production, McCann's skill and ease with his digital designing tools and process also enable him to feel more relaxed in collaboration with directors and creative teams. - "*We can try things out - without remaking the model - and crucially we can collaborate at distance*" - which is essential in McCann's globetrotting opera career.

Where he has been able to be a hands-on artist is in commissions by the National Trust to create site-specific work for historic sites. For Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire in 2015, McCann responded to two 18th century Follies, with, *Scavenger*, a giant crow in one, and *Lost Property*, an equally giant nest in the other. For Felbrigg Hall, Norfolk in 2018/19 he has been able to explore this stately home's attics and cupboards, using his findings to create four cabinets

of curiosity for visitors to investigate. Each piece of furniture is, itself, highly eccentric - amplifying the strangeness of the objects it houses. McCann acknowledges how these *Curious Cabinets* have, in turn, influenced his *architectural fantasy* designs for *Anna Bolena* opening in 2019 at the Opera de Lausanne and Opera Royale de Wallonie-Liege.

What next? In interview McCann said "*I don't normally feel like an artist...*", but maybe that is normal in an artist-designer so continually researching, experimenting, collaborating and realising complex multi-dimensional work in such diverse contexts.

Notes:

¹ Burnett, K. (ed.) 2015, *Make/Believe: UK Design for Performance 2011 - 2015*, p 120. Cardiff, SBTD.

² Crawley, G. (ed.) 2011, *Translation & Revelation: UK Design for Performance 2007 - 2011*, p 98. Cardiff, SBTD.

³ Davis, T. 2001, Richard Hudson, in *Stage Design*, p 131. Switzerland, Rotovision.

⁴ Baugh, C. 2005, *Theatre, Performance and Technology*, p 8. Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan.

⁵ Barbour, D. 2018, *Magic Bullets, Souls for Sale*. In *Lighting & Sound America*, pp 92 - 99. October 2018.

Other quoted text attributed to McCann is from an interview 13/10/2018 and email correspondence 11/2018 - 1/2019 with the author.

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