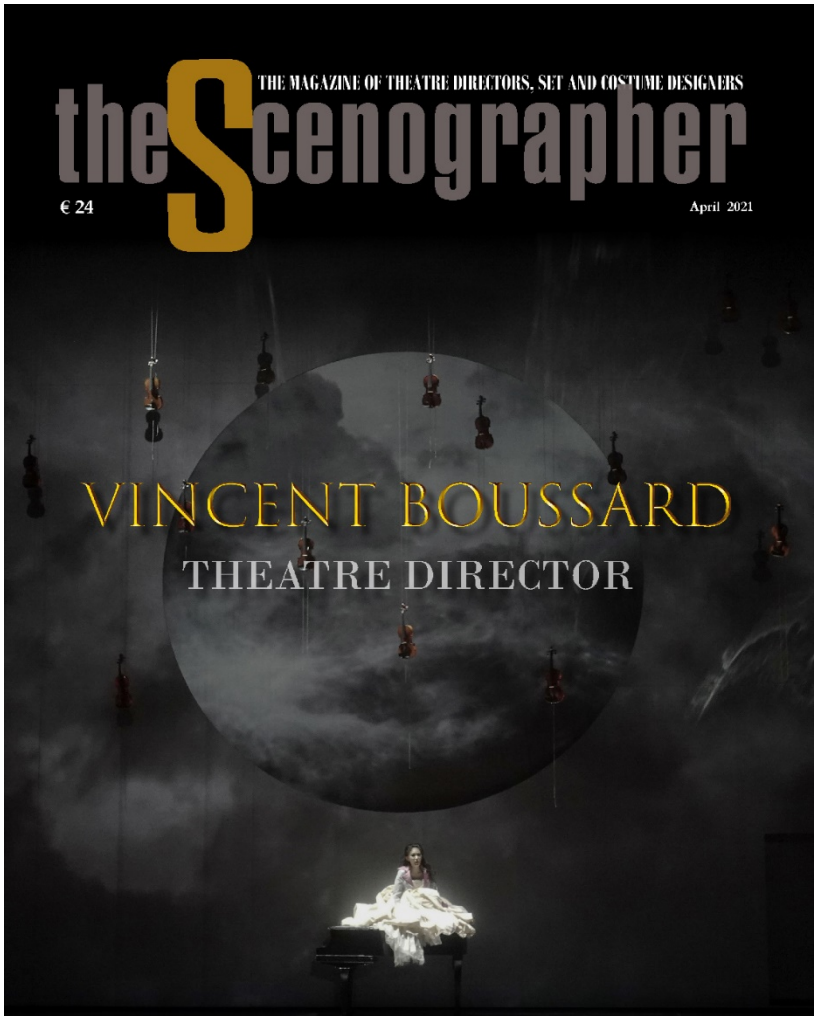

VINCENT BOUSSARD

A look back on a journey of human and artistic exploration

by Jean-Jacques Groleau

Twenty years already! Way back in 2000, Purcell's *Dido and Eneas*, one of the jewels of the repertoire. Vincent Boussard, equally passionate about theatre and music, was embarking upon a promising career as an opera director. A true man of music and theatre, a combination of instinct and intelligence, he rapidly established himself as one of the major figures on the European opera scene. We met at *La Monnaie* in Brussels, on the occasion of *Frühlings Erwachen (Spring Awakening)* and we met again at each essential stage of our professional lives, each following his own original path in the world of theatre yet always, from near or afar, attentive to the other's career path. This is undoubtedly why Vincent called me to accompany him in this account of the first two decades of his career.

This interview is an opportunity to reflect and take stock of his work and artistic commitments. Together, we will recall the decisive encounters that have marked him, his loyalty to his team, his taste and his visceral attachment to the artisanal and empirical dimension of theatre practice, but also his dramaturgical needs, his desire to touch beauty and bring emotions to the surface, etc.

His theatre is made up of encounters, an immersion in the intimacy of situations and in the viscera of music, to which Vincent relies with absolute dedication.

Vincent Boussard, could you tell us about your first contacts with the world of theatre?
I discovered opera early on, in secondary school. Our literature teacher, an opera enthusiast, took us to the theatre. In that same period I was enrolled at the conservatoire in my town, Angers, in the violin class and then in the drama class.
As a student, I lived my first experiences as an actor as unique moments, of great freedom, of utopia just like the orchestral experience at the Conservatoire. This may sound like an anecdote to you, but during the years of my studies I worked as assistant director on the staging of Corneille's *Cinna.* I was also given the smallest role of the tragedy, which is the smallest speaking part in classical French theatre, consisting of a single Alexandrine verse. To Augustus*,* who whispers a few words in his ear, Polyclète (that's his name) replies: "All your orders, Sir, shall be carried out". Notwithstanding the brevity of my role, I performed this task every evening for many months with the utmost gravity. But the day I realized that the architect of Epidaurus was a certain Polyclète the Younger. I set out to personify *Cinna* through this new dimension of my character so lacking in eloquence yet suddenly so important in the "cosmogony" of the spectacle and the history of theatre. Concealed beneath the Greek slave lay the architect and his great project! My personal dramaturgy took a very particular turn and, without betraying Corneille and his Alexandrians, I imagined a direction whose perspective, audacity and freedom of interpretation filled me. By means of this small bit part one could reach out and act out the immense. A world opened up to me that day.

And your first exposure to opera?
I felt my first great lyrical emotions with the Maria Callas record of *La Traviata* in the Lisbon live recording (1958). But beyond pure musical and dramatic emotion, this recording is paradoxically a real 'stage' experience as so much of the atmosphere of the stage is present there. Listening to it, the sound is dirty, full of the sounds from the stalls, of the props that bump into each other, of the spectators coughing. You hear the rustle of the silks of the costumes, some hesitant delays of the chorus. The voices are distributed throughout the space and, above all, you can distinctly hear the prompter (his murmured "Paris o cara..." is as moving as that of Kraus!). Forty years later, I retain a very precise memory of this life in the bowels of performance, this 'stage smell' (which seems to me attenuated in the most recent releases of this recording). Perhaps there lies a distant trace of it in my decisions to stage operas via secondary routes, through atmosphere rather than intellectual construction. Though no doubt I anticipate your questions!

In fact, let's dwell, if you don't mind, a little more on the years of 'training' so, for example, could you tell us how you came to work in the entertainment field? And what about your first important personal encounters?
To tell the truth, it is difficult to explain how one becomes an opera director. There are no schools or diplomas, at least not in the 1980s in France. I graduated from the University of Paris X in Etudes Théâtrales (Theatre Studies) and in parallel I took an acting course. During my years of study, I began working as an assistant director. I directed my first performances at the Studio-Théâtre de la Comédie-Française (of which I was the first director), in addition to shows in the genre of pop music. I can say that I partly learned my craft at the Comédie-Française, which was for me a real school of theatre and of life. I left it in 2000, and immediately began a collaboration with William Christie. He entrusted me with the creation of various productions for his ensemble "Les Arts Florissants" and I joined his fledgling Academy "Le Jardin des Voix" (The Voice Garden) in which I felt both student and trainer. I owe a lot to William Christie. He was the first to offer me his trust, his advice and - what is more impalpable but no less valuable - a certain aesthetic taste in things. I also owe to him my meeting with designer Christian Lacroix, on the occasion of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (my first production under the direction of William Christie). There were also two other early encounters with those who placed trust in me and that would prove decisive: Teresa Berganza and Bernard Foccroulle. Teresa, then head of the singing class at the Escuela di Musica Reina Sofia in Madrid invited me to conduct

my first production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* working closely with her. Bernard Focroulle invited me on several occasions to the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, then to Aix-en-Provence.
My first steps under the watchful eye of these three great musicians have instilled in me - and indelibly so - the conviction that in opera, music is the beginning of everything, it is its source and the ultimate goal, that drama must first be sought by unearthing the piece of music, that the directing is right when it makes the music even more penetrating. Even if one sometimes pays the unrewarding price of invisibility! How many confuse sobriety with insipidity, economy with poverty, transparency with inconsistency, discretion with lack of vision or personal interpretation! For some, directing requires commotion or demands an intellectual performance when - in my humble opinion - the first real effort would be to work on sensitivity and expression.

You always anticipate me, so let's start: how would you define your conception of the work of a director?
The first thing that comes to mind is perhaps my refusal to reduce opera to mere magniloquence and my desire to share this practice with performers.
For my part, from the beginning, I have scrutinised the operas for what is fragile and hidden, looking for those ways that reveal them in a new light so as to build interpretations on this basis.
I try to approach the operas, the dramatic scenarios and the characters with an eye free from anecdotes and bad habits accumulated over the centuries (which we often call tradition), to connect the opera to the sensitivity of today's spectator without distorting it, to offer a reading that though suggestive adheres to the framework dictated by the music.
This sometimes consists in changing the point of view, changing the perspective, for example by staging the listening rather than the narrative in the first instance, showing the consequences of the action rather than the action itself. My measure is always the music and its ability to expand or not under this fresh scrutiny.
When this process works, the operas resonate differently, reveal themselves with an unexpected impact, in an unforeseen light. What appeared distant becomes immediate, what seemed fragile becomes strong, etc. But each opera is different and what I describe here is just a sensitive way of reading it and not a method of staging.

Could you give us some concrete examples?
In concrete terms it is actually a shift in observation to create a subjective vision, to choose what you want to show and from what perspective. For example, in Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur*, at the end of Act III there is a pastoral-style ballet that takes place at the abode of the Princess of Bouillon, a redundancy of the 'show within the show' for which the nineteenth century went crazy. I chose not to stage the ballet in the salon as planned but moved the point of view into the corridor where the dancers are about to enter the stage from the salon door, as instructed by the dance teacher. All you see of the ballet is the backstage area. Naturally, Adriana has taken her place close to the young performers, where theatre is a tense, nervous sensation, an odour, the smell of anxiety, that of superstitions and warm-up stretching, and not in the salon of the princess filled with a refined audience where theatre shines (*Adriana Lecouvreur*, Frankfurt 2012).
Another example is Carmen's "La Seguedilla". I asked the singer not to perform it on top of the usual table in front of drooling men, but from the perspective of her profound solitude. Carmen begins the scene alone and motionless, her eye fixed in the mirror, like an artist preparing in her dressing room. Looking into her eyes, she cannot lie to herself. From this loneliness will arise a euphoria and a destructive fire, a fever that rises little by little in pursuit of the song that ignites the body to the point of incandescence. Carmen will eventually throw herself into Lillas Pastia's tavern and set it on fire (*Carmen*, Stockholm 2011).
A more recent example also comes to mind in my second version of *The Marriage of Figaro*. I made the choice to stage the Fandango and the ceremony from the perspective of Barberina and Cherubino.

We see them, hidden in a corridor, indulging in their erotic masquerades, while they sing instead of the girls the chorus praising the Count's 'virtues' (*Le nozze di Figaro*, Marseille Opera 2019). The scene, therefore, no longer just describes a sinister ceremony, but also offers the subjective point of view of the two abused teenagers and their unfiltered view of the brutal and mean world of adults.

You therefore attempt to shift the point of view.
It often happens to me to stage an event or an emotion through another angle, like adopting the point of view of the one who listens, who watches, who receives the information and who experiences it as the one who expresses it. In short, listening is a matter for the director, as active as the song and the spoken word.
I remember, as an aspiring actor, a veteran actress from the Comédie-Française who confidentially taught me one of her 'secrets': "From the quality of the actor's listening comes the strength of his presence". It was therefore a matter of learning to listen in order to be present and ready to act and interpret. I always endeavour to stage the listener as well as the singer, to transform solos into duets "of one who sings and one who listens".

And beyond this vision, which I would call dramaturgic, did you try to follow an aesthetic thread?
I realise that the spectrum of aesthetic proposals is very wide and varied, depending on the works, repertoires and theatres. As artists, we have to identify our own language in order to dig our own furrow, enrich it and question it. But one must also be wary of it when it takes over too much from creative curiosity and becomes pure academicism. I often think of Thomas Bernhardt's precept to always work in the opposite direction to one's natural vein. I perceive it as a remedy against complacency, a postulate against sterile ease.
The aesthetic options adopted can naturally vary depending on the works and the criteria for their representation. I am more concerned with finding the stylistic key for each work than with putting a signature or communicating an aesthetic 'formula' that would be my own and identifiable as such. On the other hand, I have always hesitated before returning to the same dramaturgical or scenographic terrain several times, or before using the same scenic proposal for several performances. And yet, certain readings of the works have encouraged me to share scenographic options and dramaturgical choices, if not similar, at least mirror-like. I will take as an example two operas that for me form a kind of diptych of the 18th century: on the one hand, Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*, a vision of a man from the 'century' about his contemporaries (*Nozze di Figaro*, Marseille 2019) and on the other, Bernstein's *Candide*, a vision of a 20th-century composer (*Candide*, Berlin 2011, then Vilnius 2019) who, however, adopts the narrative code of the 18th century. Despite their very different aesthetic contexts, I have placed these two works under the same gaze of an erudite society, anchored in the 18th century, with identical faces and customs. This same society, incognito and from the height of its scientific consciousness, observes, wonders, studies and orientates as much as it can the wanderings of Candide, Cunégonde, Figaro, Suzanne and all those - figures to whom I wanted to give contemporary contours - that they cross in paths that go beyond the centuries. The 'game' is then as follows: to use the 18th century to observe and marvel at the manoeuvres of the 21st century, to decipher our era. For example, in *Candide*, the Portuguese Inquisition is borrowed to denounce American McCarthyism.
With *Les Pêcheurs de Perles* (Opera National du Rhin, 2013) and *I Puritani* (Frankfurt, 2019) I have equally declined a dramaturgic and scenographic principle common to the two productions: a piano surrounded by the skeleton of an Italian-style theatre, one gradually invaded by water (*Les Pêcheurs de Perles*), the other burnt out from the beginning (*I Puritani*). This scenic layout is the result of the intrusion into the dramaturgy of the biographical data of the two composers, who, in both cases, inseparably and tragically linked their destiny to the theatre. Bizet, on the one hand, and Bellini, on the other, have in common that they 'immerse themselves' - each in their own way - in the 'furore' (a word used extensively by Bellini), in the cursed and tragic intoxication of 19th-century theatres. In

this way, adhering to the musical composition in all respects, I have tried to offer a new perspective to these operas, unfortunately considered to be dramaturgically very mediocre.

So you tell us that it is by "digging" the opera that you determine its direction, but there are external data to consider: the material conditions offered by an institution, and the singers themselves...

Indeed, it is in the work, in the heart of the work, that I wish to seek, to "dig", to bring out its intrinsic theatrical dynamic, at the cost of sometimes 'upsetting' it a little. It means working 'around' and 'inside' it, looking for its echo and putting my hands in its viscera. All this is a bit utopian and it is sometimes necessary to fight against certain working habits or penalising production conditions (double or triple companies, rehearsal time, which always tends to be reduced, shooting in two days, etc.). The real luxury in our performing arts profession is time. It takes time to linger, to dare to be curious, to meet the performers in depth and bring out what is rare or unique about them. The quality of these encounters is fundamental and depending on what they are, on what they give, the way they walk, touch, look etc., certain initial acting and directing guidelines can be modified or reinvented. If it is essential never to lose sight of the goal, the final purpose, the ultimate impact, it is also essential always to be ready to seize what the encounter with the performers offers that is unexpected and fortuitous.

For me, as a matter of principle, there are no singers who are bad actors; certainly some are more gifted than others, they have a 'sexier' body language, but it is their expressive impact rather than their skill that is the real material I work with. This requires a time that you have to make sacrosanct if you don't want to lose quality.

A third element seems variable to me: yourself. Have you never changed over the years?

I have realised that with time my aesthetic choices are moving towards more concentrated and tighter proposals. Emptiness is becoming more and more attractive to me. I am convinced, for example, that the primary function of spaces, whatever the aesthetic choices, is precisely that of creating the necessary voids into which the performers and the music will work their way. This does not mean that the space must be emptied of all formal or aesthetic elements but that the purpose of their arrangement is not to form 'habitable and decorated' spaces like houses, but to create fields of tension, playing with empty and full spaces. All aesthetic refinement is at the service of this tension.

You are one of those directors who remain faithful to their artistic collaborators. Could you tell us about them?

Perhaps fidelity, in this case, is both a question of artistic coherence and a human adventure. Certainly, it is thanks to my loyalty over time to my artistic team that I have been able to develop a specific and identifiable language that reflects our sensitivity and our convictions.

My collaboration with stage designer Vincent Lemaire began with Cavalli's *Eliogabalo* (Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Brussels) in 2004. However, my complicity with Christian began in 2000, with my first opera production of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, then from 2001 to 2003, with Charpentier's *Descente d'Orphée,* Mozart's *Re Pastore* and *Così Fan Tutte*, and Haendel's *Theodora*. Lighting designer Guido Levi joined us later for Charpentier's *Louise* (Opéra National du Rhin) in 2009. I met Guido during my years of collaboration with director Yannis Kokkos.

Guido Levi's work is more the work of a painter than a lighting technician. We were in complete agreement on the way to consider the function of lighting. He also 'dug'. First of all, he looked for an echo in the colour and in the light material of the emotions that the music gave him. He did not use light in a didactic way, he cared little for the realistic nature of situations and did not merely emphasise the architecture of spaces. He created his 'memories' with impressionistic touches, without brutal or flashy interventions. Realism was never the aim of his language and Guido always favoured a poetic vision. But how luminous some of his nights were, much more so than certain daytime scenes! And vice versa! His work, of extreme sensitivity, imposed a rhythm, a listening that was

inspired by music. Every decision regarding the lighting effect was 'musically' guided - his usual reasoning! - and located in the score. Without really reading the music, he deciphered it in his own way and let himself be guided by it. He is the only lighting designer I have ever seen in the auditorium during Italian rehearsals. Guido unfortunately left us in December 2019.
The collaboration with Christian Lacroix, which started with Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (2000), continues to this day. To date, we have staged about thirty productions together.
During our preparatory meetings, Christian speaks very little and listens a lot. He seems to be 'lurking' and takes a lot of notes, then keeps quiet for days or weeks. Then his first ideas for designs arrive. Each one offers a very distinct feature, proposes a possible dramaturgy (by 'dramaturgy' I mean the rule of the game, the ensemble of means and elements brought together to tell the tale or the character if need be). His very strong sense of theatre draws its inspiration from opera, the characters and music. His decisions always reflect a dynamic synthesis between the story (the big and the small, that of the costume and that of the character) and a very free personal composition. In fact, I always have the feeling that he 'writes' his costumes as well as drawing them (after all, his calligraphy is also a drawing). Each sketch contains the promise of a story, of a destiny. His proposals are never unmotivated, never merely formal or merely beautiful (and God knows they can be!): they always reveal a vital part of the character, they offer strong options that can steer the show in a radical direction. The first sketches, whether rich or synthetic, are always a starting point. We know that they will evolve as the work progresses, depending on the samples, the first "toile"[1], the costume fittings, the meeting with the performers, etc. From our first collaboration onwards, I have always been personally present at each of these phases. They are all an opportunity for in-depth studies and discoveries that influence the performance beyond the costume alone. Costume fittings are decisive work sessions, during which decisions are taken that guide the direction, and questions are posed and resolved that are as much related to dramaturgy as to the practicalities of hem size or sleeve length. How many times have dilemmas concerning directing been resolved in the costume shop! This complicit path in the conception and realisation of the costumes directs and nourishes my scenic work in a decisive way.
The person responsible for my collaboration with Vincent Lemaire is Bernard Foccroulle and it goes back to my very first shows with the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels. Over time, our scenographic requirements have become more refined. With Lemaire, we often refer to the 'microwave' effect of a space, that is, its capacity to lay bare and create dramatic tension for the characters without situating them in the networks of anecdotal history or in the heaviness of an overly intrusive symbolism. This is often mistaken for an oversimplification in favour of a line, a choice, a situation that determines a interpretative angle. Sometimes, at first sight, it is a bit disconcerting for the performers, but their acting is strengthened when they manage to accept any constraints. I like this 'dynamic constriction' of spaces. It combines the natural exercise of placing the characters within a narrative context with that of directing the performers in their expressiveness, in their style, and placing them balanced on a thread, on the edge of a poetic and existential void. The stage becomes a 'partner' of the performance, not simply a container.
To these collaborators we must add the choreographer Helge Letonja, the video-designer Isabelle Robson, the performer Sofia Pintzou... who enrich my productions with their creative complicity.

You talk about the sets as "acting partners". Could you give us an example?
It brings to mind Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet* (Marseille 2010; Strasbourg 2011; Avignon 2015, and Lausanne 2018), which caused some controversy. In Act IV, where Ophelia drowns, we decided to put the singer around and in a tub. After her farewells to the world she dreamed of, Ophélie gradually, but irremediably, ends up being totally sucked into a suicidal drowning. Shakespeare's Ophelia doubtless may not have had much to do with a bathtub, but more than one girl in our century will have sunk into one, slitting her wrists to end her days. The physical or poetic constraint is real and

[1] The first muslin mock-up of a costume

arduous for the performer, but it is also a source of inspiration. She spends over twenty minutes with this tub as her 'partner', exploring it at every angle and before collapsing into it. On the day of the premiere, the singer remained more than ten minutes in the bottom of her bathtub, basking in the public's applause, which she only managed to stop with a shy gesture of the hand.
In the same vein, Juliet (Bellini's *The Capulets and The Montagues*, Munich 2011; Graz 2011; San Francisco 2012; Barcelona 2016, and Vilnius 2017) stands on a kind of washbasin / holy water font (purifies the body as it uplifts the soul) to reach a suspended Christ in an unlikely embrace. Juliet sings in this desire for reunion her entire first aria "O quante volte..." in search of the breath she lacks to finish the phrases. The floating tension of the body reaches that of the soul and the notes. No singer, from Anna Netrebko to Patrizia Ciofi, from Nicole Cabell to Eri Nakamura, etc., has ever objected to these 'coercions' in order to avoid the imbalance of positions required by the director, and all have been able to draw tenfold expressive power from this uncomfortable situation. In the same way, we chose to offer Romeo and Juliet only a corner formed by two boundless walls as a meeting place for their trysts, and to give them no other way out than the brutal clash of bodies, the absorption of one by the other.

In what way do you think opera is - or is not - that moribund or ageing genre, as it is often described?
Opera is a profoundly archaic art form, which has the distinction of speaking from afar while touching us intimately. Although it seems so elaborate and sophisticated, it is in its essence extremely simple to grasp: someone tells a story by singing to someone else who listens. I am deeply convinced that the archaic nature of opera is precisely what makes it so powerful and rare today. It is by tapping into this archaic part based on the simple presence and enunciation of live speech, emphasised by dilated emotional episodes, that the work comes alive and at times enhances the experience of performance, beyond mere entertainment or a product of cultural consumption (or discrimination).

The 19th century was perhaps the richest, most active and creative period in opera. How do you experience nostalgia for this golden age and its traditions? Does it inspire you in your work today?
The 19th century put the theatre at the centre of concerns and interests, making even these 'temples' the architectural centres of gravity of cities. A considerable part of the future of nations was decided on the stages, in the stalls or in the foyers. It celebrated its divas - actresses, singers or dancers - like no other century before. At the dawn of the 20th century, cinema then took over the place occupied by opera in previous centuries (in this sense Puccini is, so to speak, the last of the composers).
I live my passion for the 19th century in general without any nostalgia and I would say that I am more attracted by the ashes than by the golds. It may seem anecdotal, but I have always been struck by the fires that destroyed many theatres during this century. Like a premonitory parable, each fire reminds us of the paradoxical character of opera: it reigns supreme but is essentially fragile and ephemeral (the 'fires' that destroy opera today are of a different nature: deculturation, withdrawal into itself, disinterest of the working classes, etc.).
Going back to the 19th century, there was a theatre fire about every two years in Europe! This, in its own way, contributes to the construction of the myth of opera. I am fascinated by all these fires that hit theatres, suddenly swallowed up between reality and fiction in the horror of a catastrophe that has no equal, save in the poetic accents that resonated there.
I am currently working on preparing a new production of *Mignon* by Ambroise Thomas (based on Goethe's *Wilhem Meister's Apprenticeship*) for the 2022 season. The fire in the second act of the theatre in which Philine's company is performing strangely seems to be a prophetic echo of the real fire at the Opéra-Comique, one evening in May 1887, during a performance of... *Mignon*. Following this fire, the Opéra-Comique was rebuilt as we know it today. In all this, a very disconcerting form of mythology, a dramaturgical key (in which I still don't know how to orientate myself) to decipher a

work in which the ‘fabula’ refers to the hidden desire of a young author, who dreams of elevating society through theatre, where the ideal and the real unite.

You talk about the existing repertoire, but you also have a real inclination for and practical experience of creation.
In my view, opera has no future if it sits on its repertoire without enriching and renewing it. It cannot endlessly regenerate the baroque or forgotten masterpieces.
The problem today is: what kind of contemporary writing to propose and for which repertoire project? The production of completely original and accessible operas does not seem to have really found favourable ground for expansion. Moreover, to put it succinctly, opera (a few ‘totem’’figures such as Monteverdi, Mozart and Wagner escape anathema) as an artistic genre and as a social practice inherited from the 19th century, has been regarded by proponents of so-called contemporary music as at best ‘a simplistic art’, an amusement intended for a decadent bourgeoisie.
The compositional enterprise that aims to reinvent a practice, to rethink an art with renewed ambition, is not only praiseworthy but valuable and necessary. But it is also a source of enormous misunderstandings: confusing legibility with simplicity and naivety, fragility and transparency with inconsistency, one ends up down a rabbit hole and falls into the trap of hermeticism.

In addition to the mere problem of creation, I have the impression that you have also dealt with the crux of directing in recent decades. It would seem that in order to make sense, in order to be taken seriously, in particular, it is necessary to abandon beauty. What do you think?
The more I move forward, the more deeply I am convinced of the central, primordial role of beauty, the ultimate goal and essential subject (certainly the years spent with Yannis Kokkos as assistant director have left an indelible mark on me)! Today, my naivety makes me believe that beauty is the only weapon within my reach to fight against murderous ugliness. I do not speak of beauty or ugliness only as decorative canons. Monstrosity and irregularity can also generate a beauty that shocks, and formal ‘beauty’ can often be indigestible. It is the reality of emotions that is beautiful, the impact of which is even more mind-blowing when it springs forth before our very eyes.
I am convinced that in order to express the most intimate feelings in their complexity and to narrate the (often paradoxical) situations, the performance has no choice but to rely on a necessary readability, which guarantees a shared resonance of the work in the fleeting moment of its representation.
The job of a director is not only to stage operas but also to take a stance, to establish a reading, a vision on the operas themselves. In my opinion, it is essential that the director - as I have already mentioned - does not ignore the specificities of each style, that he grasps the dramatic rarity of each composer (let's note that all have been demanding tyrants with their librettists) and bases his dramaturgy on the virtues of each work without imposing exogenous dramatic devices. He is then free to modify the narrative context, the era, etc., and to reconstitute the ‘fabula’ as he sees fit. Few works resist the Regietheater's destructuring endeavour, while almost all are open to an original and personal reinterpretation of the storyline, when it is based on the work's intrinsic dramatic force.
This does not mean that the composer or director should limit themselves to a merely illustrative production, but simply that, however complex and elaborate their narrative or dramaturgical decisions may be, their writing will be valued if it is able to make their version intelligible.
There is an understanding and a narrative specific to the scene that escapes intellectualism. Contemporary production has often tended to reduce singing to a didactic or mechanical ‘hyper-instrument’. Stripped bare, divested of all emotion (as ‘bel canto’ was long suspected of collusion with vulgarity), it is in some ways robbed of its specificity and force. Similarly, concerns about theatrical legibility are seen as concessions to demagogy... not considering that this legibility guarantees the link with the public that should never be broken. What angers me is the tendency to gather so many people as an audience and send them home with the feeling that they have not grasped any idea, that they have not been able to understand the symbols and objects that have been presented

to them; in other words, the tendency to exclude part of the public and make theatre a matter for the few. Don't get me wrong: we must always fight the temptation to be reactionist, which is fruitless and retrograde, but the opposite tendency is also dangerous.
Opera was originally the art of creation; nowadays it is essentially the art of interpretation. After all, it may be that its rightful place is to be kept cosy at the bottom of the 'drawer' of past art production, tucked between the repertoire and contemporary creation. And it may well be that its now baroque, impure, 'bastard' and complex nature, endlessly recyclable - and indestructible, contains this part of modernity behind which, ashamed of being 'an old thing', it never stops running.
And let me insist: my aspirations are not disconnected from the world around us and the social and cultural issues that recent health events have exacerbated. I don't want to be totally detached from reality, and I must also bear witness to it, while endeavouring never to attach myself to current events in an anecdotal manner.

In addition to the productions you mentioned earlier to clarify some of your statements, which do you consider to have been the most notable?
Rather than talking about productions, I would prefer to talk about encounters. Chronologically, just after my first collaboration with "Les Arts-Florissants", my meeting with Bernard Foccroulle determines a key moment in my career, offering me a rare and precious support right from the start. It was to be five productions and as many seasons at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, then two more for the Aix-en-Provence festival. He was a generous yet demanding interlocutor, concerned always to place our relationship under the sign of freedom of interpretation and intelligence. This collaboration focused particularly on Mozart, whose 250th anniversary was celebrated in 2006: *Il re pastore* (2003 and 2006). *Così fan tutte* (2006) for Brussels, *Le nozze di Figaro* (2007) and *La finta giardiniera* (2012) for Aix-en-Provence.
It is also thanks to him that I met the composer Benoît Mernier, whose first opera I directed: *Frülings Erwachen* (*Spring Awakening*) based on Wedekind's tragedy (commissioned by the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels, 2007). This was a somewhat 'ideal' collaboration, with the composer and the director working together from the first word of the libretto to the last note of the score. A three-year process put to good use for a common aim. It is also to Bernard Foccroulle that I owe my meeting the set designer Vincent Lemaire, who has accompanied me on most of my productions since 2004. Finally, it is Bernard Foccroulle again who is responsible for my collaboration with René Jacobs for the creation of Cavalli's *Eliogabalo* (Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels, 2005), which marked for me the beginning of a new artistic journey. The collaboration with this great master of Baroque music, with his complete background as a singer, musicologist, conductor, philologist, great lover of rhetoric and consummate Latinist, was particularly fruitful because of his dedication to the text, to the dramaturgy, to his dynamics and his energy.
With him, the text of the libretto is not a simple pretext for composing music. From the verse comes the musical phrase, it enshrines it in a rhythm, determines its colours and affects. The work on Cavalli's opera was exciting, following a procedure similar in many points to that of a creation. In fact, censored at its staging in Venice, the work had never been performed until then and has come down to us only in fragments. It took us many months to recompose and reshape it, starting with documents from facsimiles of Venetian copyists. Our collaboration continued in Innsbruck, where we revived *Eliogabalo*, *Il Re Pastore* and where we collaborated on a new production of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Then we met in Berlin at the request of the Staatoper Unter den Linden (one of Berlin's three opera houses) for a production of Haendel's *Agrippina* (2010), with Alexandrina Pendachanska in the principal role (previously Elvira in our *Don Giovanni*, and a few years later Richard Strauss's *Salome* in my 2012 production), then in Vienna (Theater an der Wien, 2013) for Haendel's *Radamisto*.

To hear you tell it, the countries of Germanic influence have been a very important factor in the development of your career.

After Haendel's *Agrippina* in Berlin (2010), I was invited for some fifteen new productions in the Germanic countries (Germany, Austria, Switzerland etc.), from Berlin to Frankfurt, via Hamburg, Munich, Dresden, Essen, Salzburg, Vienna, Graz etc.
I discovered another way of working, marked by the 'repertoire' (alternating different performances on a daily basis) with its consequences not only on the organisation of work but also on aesthetics and dramaturgic decisions. It was also in Germany that I was confronted for the first time with the great opera repertoire, from Bellini to Strauss, via Meyerbeer, Verdi, Wagner and Puccini. I add to the list Cilea (whose *Adriana Lecouvreur* was an intense theatrical and musical emotion for me) and Kurt Weil, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (Berlin 2014). This opera left me with an ambivalent memory: I felt for the first time in 'conflict' with an opera, yet this production, among those staged with Lemaire, Lacroix and Levi, remains for me one of the most complete, successful and personal.

What happened in this production to talk about "conflict"?
Conflict to be relativised! Staging *Mahagonny* at the Staatsoper Berlin, one of Germany's temples of opera, is no mean feat. I knew that I would have to come up against a certain academicism, that my reading would not meet certain 'local expectations'. Moreover, I did not have total confidence in the piece: I felt all its lyrical power, but I also got a whiff of something 'fake' about it, a kind of fraud. As if I doubted the sincerity! In reality, I was mainly annoyed by its 'didactic pretensions' which - in my opinion - are not up to the expressive force of, for example, the "Kranische Duett" (one of the opera's key moments). While working on the opera, I decided not to concentrate on theoretical Brecht (I had already done too much of that at university) but on poetic Brecht (*Mahagonny* is full of Brecht's poetic production).

Rather than talk about budgets, tell us about your hopes and plans for the future.
They are varied. I would like, for instance, to continue to defend certain operas, the beauty of whose music is praised but their presumed scenic and dramaturgical weakness is easily criticised. Take Bellini, for instance, whose dramaturgy is sometimes considered weak and uninteresting. I am convinced, however, that Bellini's 'fragility' is not a weakness, but that it is precisely in laying bare and creating tension in the vocal and dramatic line that his strength and emotional truth are expressed. It is in this area that one must look for Bellini's true drama, not in the heroic accents of certain pages but in the intimate - almost blatant - lacerations of the tortured souls who interpret these infinite sorrows. I need only recall Joyce Di Donato and Patrizia Ciofi in *I Capuleti e Montecchi* (Barcelona, 2016) to reinforce this conviction; but no doubt the performers must be of that calibre to achieve this exceptional degree of intensity and dramatic power.
I would also hope to renew the experience of collaborating with a composer. With Benoit Mernier, we are planning a new production based on a short story by an American feminist writer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper", which we expect to present to the public in 2023. It is in the soprano Patrizia Ciofi that the composer plans to embody this magnificent role of a woman struggling against the patriarchal burden on her personal destiny. We are at the stage of sketching the outlines and are currently working to find theatres interested in producing this new show.

Jean-Jacques Groleau

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of the Opera National du Rhin (2004-2011) and the Opera Orchestre National in Montpellier, he was appointed in 2016 as Acting Artistic Director of the Théâtre du Capitole in Toulouse.