



## **Thaddeus Strassberger Multiple mythologies**

*By Yehuda Shapiro*

Fort Worth in 1963 and Auschwitz in 1943 have both been on Thaddeus Strassberger's mind recently, but the director and designer – Oklahoma-born, London-based, and a specialist in opera – exudes the same intense energy and curiosity in his engagement with Ancient Babylon as evoked in 1840s Milan. “My role has never been to invent new worlds,” he explains, “but to act as the curator of a vast collection from the whole of history and to choose the bits of our world that are right for the opera I’m working on. As I travel around, I collect images that seem to pop out at me and I store them in my head. Then, when I am starting to put together initial concepts for a production of a specific opera, I go shopping in my interior charity shop of ideas to see what would work. There is a huge treasure trove that we can pick from and sometimes you can take an item and transform it into something new ... a director’s or a designer’s ‘brand’ does not have to be associated with the same aesthetic all the time, and by taking on both roles I instinctively challenge myself to be bolder, to take risks, to push things further. The ideas I come up with early in the process are not necessarily

representative of the final staging, but they provide a starting point for my formal research – I love to research. I tend to identify the soul, the DNA of an opera early on. Once you find its core aesthetic, you must explore it deeply. You can't veer away from it, even if details can change as you go through the process of bringing the opera to the stage."

In April 2016 Strassberger directed the world premiere in Fort Worth, Texas of *JFK*, an opera by composer David T. Little and librettist Royce Vavrek, described by the Fort Worth Opera as "an intimate portrait of President John F. Kennedy and First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy on the eve of the President's fateful trip to Dallas." If that might suggest the operatic equivalent of a biopic or TV dramatisation, the laudatory review in the New York magazine *Opera News* tells another story: "The realistic, rotating hotel set, designed by the director, Thaddeus Strassberger, is framed by rows and columns of neon lights, signaling that though this work is grounded in history, it's also oneiric, fact filtered through its creators' let-loose imaginations."

As Strassberger points out: "The entire creative team for *JFK* was born after 1963. People who experienced Kennedy's assassination first-hand have a particular knowledge of and relationship with the events, but our inheritance of it as an historical event is no less valid. When designing and directing an opera, you have to find ways of producing something that *feels* real. Opera is, of course, by nature highly stylised, but even the artistic narratives that we perceive as realistic are contrivances. In a TV drama you will see a police car moving from one part of London to another in 30 seconds, rather than getting stuck in traffic, or you will see people talking to each other quite normally in a bar or nightclub where in reality they would be shouting to make themselves heard.

"You have to be careful with details – they need to feel as if they fit in, but they must not distract from what's going on. What you choose to include is a matter of taste, discrimination and experience – that's your trademark as a designer or a director. *JFK* is set in a well-documented hotel room – we know exactly what it looked like and the hotel is still there in Fort Worth. I spent a lot of time recreating that room and then taking away every single detail that wasn't needed, while still leaving the members of the audience knowing exactly where they were ... You can't have people thinking 'But that's not how it was', or you risk losing them. What do you do about a door knob or a plug point? You don't need all the plug points, but if you take them all away the room will become alienating. The bathroom is important in *JFK* [which starts off with Kennedy, Marat-like, taking a bath], but do you keep the toilet brush in the corner ...?" Strassberger acknowledges the need for a kind of creative sleight of hand. "Dealing with real people as operatic characters is tricky ... There's Jackie's famous pink Chanel suit. Everyone thinks they know exactly what it looked like, but most people couldn't sketch the lapel, they wouldn't know the number of buttons on the jacket, where the skirt sat on her knee, or the height of the heel she wore with it. And Mattie Ullrich [the costume designer, one of Strassberger's regular collaborators], also needed to come up with something that would look good on the singer, Daniela Mack. The suit can't be exactly as it was on Jackie – but that doesn't really matter ... Even if it is all wrong, it needs to *feel* right. When it came to the music, some commentators criticised the composer's choice to give the role of Jackie to a dark-voiced mezzo when Jackie herself had a high-pitched speaking voice, but what matters in opera is the musical expression, the inner poetry – not the reality. Ultimately, *JFK*, like so many other operas, is about creating a mythological past – we believe more readily in the mythology of the power of images than in the talismanic power of real objects."

There is a double layer of mythology in Verdi's *Nabucco*. Drawing on the Old Testament, it tells of the Israelites and their enslavement by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, but, a major success when it was first performed at La Scala in 1842, the opera acquired a political charge in a region of Italy under Austrian rule. Strassberger's staging was originally conceived for Washington D.C. in the 2012-13 season and has since been taken over by a number of other companies, including Minnesota Opera and Opera Philadelphia. "This production of *Nabucco* was conceived for a relatively conservative audience that likes idea of grand operatic spectacle, but also for a city with

an extraordinary concentration of people who are dealing with complex geopolitical issues – which also lie behind the events of *Nabucco*. The production starts off looking like everyone’s idea of 19<sup>th</sup> century grand opera, seducing you and sucking you into its beautiful, lavish world. But then there are hints of something different ... of a theatre within a theatre and of an 1840s audience on stage that is interacting with the singers, of backstage drama.” When it came to the famous Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves, ‘Va, pensiero’ (which has become a kind of alternative Italian national anthem), there was a chorus of 100 singers on stage, but the audience could also see another 100 people behind them, the technicians and artists who had manufactured the show. “It suggested the way that artifice is supported by reality,” says Strassberger, “how *Nabucco* as an opera was buoyed by larger political sentiment.”

Even the designs, which explicitly evoked the scenography of the 1840s, told more than one story. “There was a reviewer who criticised the presence in Babylon of Roman-style costumes and the wrong sort of palm tree – suggesting that perhaps Mr Strassberger hadn’t done his homework properly ... But in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century very little was known about Babylon, so artists would take inspiration from the more familiar ancient cultures, such as Egypt and Greece. When the opera was first seen at La Scala in 1842, Roman costumes were recycled from previous productions – as part of my research, I went to Milan and saw actual costume renderings from the period – as were some of the sets. The ‘mistakes’ and anachronisms in my designs were deliberate – those palm trees, for instances, were taken from the décor for a ballet set in Ancient Egypt. My production was not intended as some kind of documentary: its aim was to produce a spectacle as it might have been *imagined* in Verdi’s time. It was intended as fantasy, not reproduction, but also as an environment for powerful human drama.”

It was also in some sense a reflection of Verdi’s pragmatism as a man of the theatre. Famously, he and his librettists had to shift the period and location of several of his operas in order to placate the censors and get the new works on the stage. The most extreme case was probably *Un ballo in maschera*, which, like *JFK*, deals with an historical assassination; it ended up migrating from 18<sup>th</sup> century Sweden and the court of King Gustavus III to colonial Boston in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Strassberger is due to direct the opera at Innsbruck in Spring 2017, and creative routes he is investigating include the films of directors such as de Sica and Pasolini and the atmosphere and culture of the city of Naples. “Verdi himself emphasised that the action would need to be set in a context where the predictions of Ulrica [the mezzo-soprano soothsayer] would carry some weight. In Naples Catholicism rubs shoulders with pagan traditions and numerology and there can also be a considerable disjunction between external appearances and internal life, both physically and emotionally ... even the façade of the opera house, the Teatro San Carlo, doesn’t give much of a clue to the opulent auditorium that is inside.” Strassberger is aware that his *Ballo* might finally find its home in quite a different geography or aesthetic, but, whatever transpires, the Neapolitan foray will have taken him further in his exploration of the opera’s themes and genesis.

Another production planned for 2017 is *The Passenger* by the Polish-born composer Mieczysław Weinberg, who died in Russia in 1996. It will be staged in Ekaterinburg, where Strassberger enjoyed a substantial success in 2014 with the Russian premiere of Philip Glass’s *Satyagraha*, a work inspired by the life of Gandhi; the production went on to win the 2016 Golden Mask Critics’ Award for Best Production, presented by the Theatre Union of the Russian Federation. *The Passenger* deals with a 20<sup>th</sup> century trauma even greater than the assassination of President Kennedy: the Holocaust. It is also based on the personal testimony of survivor of Auschwitz, Zofia Posmysz, who wrote the radio play and novel on which the opera is based. “*The Passenger* opens on a cruise ship in 1959, but it flashes back to Auschwitz in 1943. There was a need to condense and capture the essence of that terrible place in a way that captured its metaphorical, symbolic impact, but without being in any way disrespectful to the people who suffered and died there.” Strassberger had the opportunity to meet Zofia Posmysz, now in her nineties, in Poland in 2015. “I

was able to sit down and talk with her and dissect details that are authentic to the time and place and that will serve to hint at a larger reality.”

Strassberger is also acutely conscious of the way that Russia’s memory of World War II and its consequences is very different from Western Europe’s or America’s. “Being an outsider to the society you live in makes you more keenly aware of how you observe things. I wouldn’t have arrived at my aesthetic if I hadn’t left the US. It has made me realise that everything is a choice, that I can’t take anything for granted. I have spent time living in Italy and Germany and now, having moved to London eight years ago, I have become even more aware of the way people use (ostensibly) the same language in a different way, and of the way they express themselves through fashion and art. I’m on the outside looking in as I organise the details.”

Strassberger’s breakthrough came in 2005 when he won the European Opera Prize for a production of Rossini’s *La Cenerentola*, a comedy tinged with both romance and cruelty, that was staged for Opera Ireland and the Hessisches Staatstheater in Wiesbaden. Though he knew from an early age that he wanted to work in the theatre, he originally trained as engineer, gaining a degree from The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City. He confesses that his main aim in choosing this prestigious institution was to gain ready access to the cultural opportunities of Manhattan, notably the Metropolitan Opera, but he also feels that: “I have an analytical mind that was brought together through the engineering education. Most importantly, though, it brought me into contact with really intelligent people who were interested in solving problems. Everybody thinks of engineering as being a technical discipline, but it is also a highly creative field, since, when you are faced with a series of technical problems, you need to use – or even invent – a variety of tools to solve them. When I work on a staging I take a highly organised approach so that everyone knows what they have to do. I even come armed with an Excel spreadsheet setting out the logistics of the production. It’s not just a matter of having ideas, but of getting them across coherently and efficiently to hundreds of people.

“Because the composer has given the opera a strong structure, as the director you are forced to come up with really good ideas within that structure. When I’m working on a new opera, or an older opera that is rarely performed, like Franz Schreker’s *Der ferne Klang*, I have the freedom to turn up as a director and put it on the stage without having to un-engineer what people thought it was going to be. When it’s a piece that has a firm place in the repertoire, such as Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, I need to engage in some sort of dialogue with what has gone before, always with the aim of recreating the raw feelings that the opera aroused in the composer and the audiences of his time ... Yes, the score’s always the same, but what can you examine differently on the stage? I love it when people tell me that one of my productions was not what they were expecting. Sometimes, simply by shifting the time or place of the action you can break an audience’s expectation, and it can lead to more openness and more understanding of something about the characters and their situation. Other times, you must completely re-examine the very essence of the human relationships portrayed in a piece. But in approaching each new production, there is absolutely no point in telling a story again if it is simply to make us feel satisfied at having moved on.”