

# Chicago's loss, our gain

## Opera director Christopher Alden discusses his innovative staging of Rigoletto

By Lydia Perovic

One of the busiest opera directors on the international opera circuit today, Christopher Alden was in Toronto this September for the rehearsals of the new production of Verdi's *Rigoletto* at the Canadian Opera Company. His creative team chose to set the work in the period in which Verdi composed the opera.

The Chicago Lyric Opera decided not to revive this production due to donor pressure, but Toronto audiences seem to be more open to innovative readings of the old operatic mainstays. The new *Rigoletto* premiered at the COC on Sept. 29 and will be on stage until Oct. 22.

**How did you decide on this approach? Is this your first *Rigoletto*?**

First time Michael Levine and I worked on this was about twelve years ago in Chicago. We were looking for a way to portray a strong power structure that the audience would immediately recognize, and we felt that setting the opera in its original period, in Renaissance, wouldn't work for this purpose. The costumes of the renaissance era look all alike to us today and we tend to romanticize them, so it becomes hard to identify the power differ-



Christopher Alden

entials among the characters. We wanted to have a somewhat drier, more modern period, but not completely modern, so we decided to settle on the period the piece was written in. The people who wrote the piece were talking about their time as much as anything else. Michael Levine and I tried to find an era that would make this obvious to the audience, and not have people observe a lot of singers in fancy clothes.

**When was a more contemporary set up ruled out?**

That had to do with the company we did this for first, the Chicago Lyric. I was told, We want you to do the kind of thing that you do, but also something that we can revive here. But this is also important to me – whenever I work on a new production of an opera from the past, I always try to see if there's a way to do it *other than* in modern clothes. That's been such a successful fall-back way to strip away some of the fantasy elements and to get down to what's timeless about a particular piece, or what's modern about it. But I always feel that if I can do it without doing it in modern clothes, I'm happy to not do modern clothes.

Another fall-back solution is setting it in the era when it was written. In this case, it was really obvious to us that Verdi's *Rigoletto* was Verdi's response to his own time, so we took the latter approach.

**So what exactly happened in Chicago? That story preceded you here, as I'm sure you know. The subscribers of the Chicago Lyric thought the production was disrespectful**



A scene from the Canadian Opera Company production of *Rigoletto*, 2011. Conductor Johannes Debus, director Christopher Alden, set and costume designer Michael Levine and lighting designer Duane Schuler. Photo: Michael Cooper

to Verdi?

I guess... No, but it was an exciting opening night. There was a lot of booing but also a lot of people who loved the show. We had a strong production there. People running the company said after the opening night, We really support this production, we feel so positive about it that we're going to revive it in a few years. And it was scheduled to be revived about four years later. Maybe a year before it was going to happen, I got a telephone call from the guy running the company. "I know I told you at the time how much we support this production, but the times have changed economically..." — this was not too long after 9/11, when things went wonky and it was a dodgy time for arts organizations. As it is now. So I completely sympathize. He also said, "We don't want to offend some of our major donors so we're not going to revive this production after all."

That became something of a red flag about opera in the U.S., art in the U.S. There is a different kind of environment for arts organizations that are funded through corporate and private donations than for those subsidized by the state, which can afford to be more adventurous and not just do art which flatters the patrons but which challenges and maybe disturbs.

**There are some dramatic scenes in this production that exactly mirror the tempera-**



Ekaterina Sadovnikova as Gilda and Quinn Kelsey as Rigoletto in the Canadian Opera Company production of *Rigoletto*, 2011. Conductor Johannes Debus, director Christopher Alden, set and costume designer Michael Levine and lighting designer Duane Schuler. Photo: Michael Cooper

**ment of the music. How closely do you follow the music in individual scenes? Not all directors do it necessarily.**

I follow it very closely. Opera for me is music, above everything else. And directing operas is a lot closer to choreography than to directing a realistic play. It's all dictated by the music, and that's doesn't necessarily mean that everything you do will follow the orchestral tempo. Often it's about creating an interesting tension between what's happening visually and what's happening in the music. But the visuals are always in relationship to the music.

**What do you do with such wildly known and popular but in fact, given the context, vicious and somewhat ridiculous arias such as "La donna e mobile"? Do you ever have the urge to make fun of that moment and make fun of the character?**

Oh yes. And I do in this production.

**There's that silent applause by the courtiers at the end, after the real audience has done clapping.**

To me, "La donna e mobile" is a fascinating thing. It's the Duke's credo about women and a somewhat misogynistic statement. It's the credo of the powerful men who build their power on the disenfranchisement and subjugation of women in the dog-eat-dog world. The artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century began to realize the world was changing, that the value system was changing rapidly in a very negative way after the industrialization and that humans were rapidly being turned into commodities. That's what this play I think was talking about, that's what Verdi was talking about. And they were right, they saw the way the world was going.

**What is your take on why so many women are killed off in the operas by Verdi and Puccini?**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, opera became the glorification of the female voice and the audience worship concentrated on the soprano as the true avatar of opera. But! At the same time opera developed a funny relationship to its female characters. It was all about putting them on a pedestal and adoring them, and at the same time fearing them and needing to feel superior to them and controlling one's feelings towards them. So we have operas that are

essentially about the pleasure of watching the woman suffer and die, or sacrifice herself, or lose her mind. Opera does become a convenient venue to express a whole spectrum of male ambivalence and anxiety over women.

**Would you say that Italian opera houses are more conservative than their European counterparts when it comes to staging the works of the Italian operatic canon?**

Yes, I think so. Though I'm

sure there are places in Italy where they do less traditional productions. Robert Carsen and Micheal Levine are about to do a *Don Giovanni* at La Scala, and the kind of work that they do is very untraditional, very modern, simple, stripped down, spare approach to things. Even in Italy this kind of doing opera is starting to make sense to them.

**Did you ever give up on an opera, thinking, this is just too weird, no contemporary audience will recognize themselves in this?**

Probably not... That's why I do opera as opposed to other, more naturalistic art forms. I love the insane, dreamy, fairy tale nature of it.

In a way there's nothing more unreal than opera but actually its reality is of a different order: there are things in human nature that you can only get at through these more subliminal tools that opera operates in. ♦

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