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Thursday June 05, 2025

The follies of directors: Shakespeare, Wagner and the Glyndebourne 'Parsifal'

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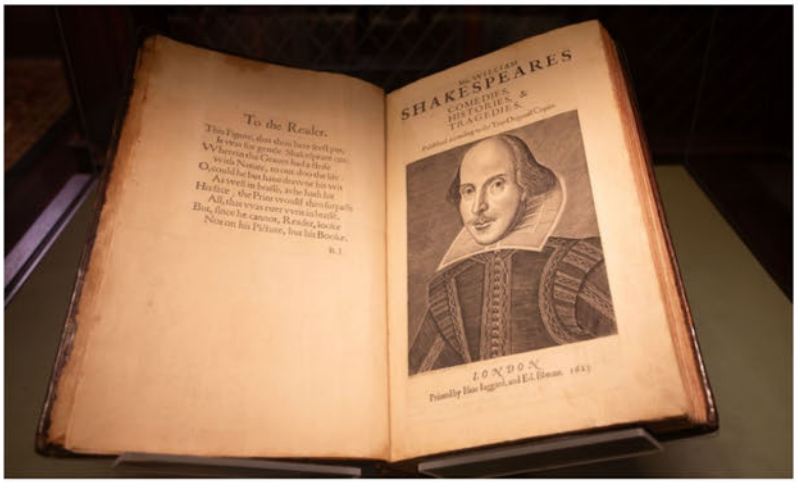

For as long as plays and operas have been realised on stage, decisions have had to be made about how those realisations were to take shape. Over time, the person with principal responsibility for making these decisions came to be known as the director. Given how many choices there were at the director's disposal and how important they were, the role gradually assumed a significance second only to that played by the creator of the original work of art.

Yet it was inherent in the nature of the project that the director's task was subservient to that already performed by the playwright or composer. First, the only reason why he had a job in the first place was because the underlying work existed and there was an appetite to see it performed. Secondly, whatever the director's distinction, there were few cases in which he was of a calibre or had a following which remotely approached that of the person whose work he was called on to realise. For these and related reasons, it used to be regarded as axiomatic that the main responsibility of the director was to discern and then as fully and imaginatively as possible to bring to life the intentions of the primary creator.

Related to these considerations was the fact that great playwrights and composers were once respected, even revered, for the stature and authority of their texts. These had typically been tested in the crucibles of time and fashion – and survived. In that innocent age, the idea that giants such as Shakespeare or Wagner had less to tell the contemporary world than that world had to impose upon them would have seemed ridiculous.

Membership of the canon conferred upon authors the privilege not just of being treated seriously on their own terms but of being deferred to as a matter of principle in relation to their own creations. This did not require a slavish literalism. The creator's intentions were never clear to the last detail. Tastes and performance conventions changed. The world itself did not stand still. Freedoms could always be exercised so long as they were consistent with the recognition that it was the creator alone who possessed the trump card.

These liberties were in part the consequence of practical considerations: for example, the judicious cutting of a play was not seen as a departure *per se*, though it was objectionable if it led to a distortion of the underlying conception. In fact, all sorts of variations in production were both permitted and potentially enriching, so long as the audience was able to trust the director – to feel that the staging was steeped in knowledge and understanding of the original work and had the intention of putting it before the public in a spirit of loyalty to the fundamentals of the work in question. It is true that whether the director had succeeded was inevitably subjective and often a matter of controversy. But audiences could usually tell whether he or she had at least tried.

Several years ago, I wrote an essay for the much-missed *Standpoint* magazine which

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expressed regret for the way in which theatre and opera directors had developed the increasing tendency to reverse the hierarchy suggested above, and to treat their own conceptions as *a priori* more important than the original artist's – to diminish or desecrate or distract from the original, while still taking advantage of the free ride which its cachet bestowed.

That was in 2017, and things have only got worse since. In general, the greater the artist, the greater the tendency towards transgression. Shakespeare is nowadays a prime target for the treatment. Indeed, it is increasingly difficult to find productions of his work which dare to adopt any form of conventional approach. Alteration of characters' genders has become *de rigueur*, even when it makes a nonsense of the relations in the play – as with The Bridge's Theatre's 2018 *Julius Caesar*, where audiences were treated to Brutus' friendship with "Cassia", a stunt which incidentally also threw the hero's relationship with his wife Portia completely out of kilter. (By all means let us have Glenda Jackson take on the role of King Lear or Cush Jumbo play Hamlet; in both those cases, the *character* remained male.)

So it is no surprise that radical subversions of the dramatist's text, which should be off-limits, are now paraded like a badge of honour. A 2022 Globe production of *The Winter's Tale* by Sean Holmes rewrote the entirety of act 4, and in the final act spoiled the lead-in to one of the most moving scenes in all of Shakespeare with a joke about Brexit. How numbingly disappointing it all was, especially for those who had been looking forward to a play performed not all that often, and who remembered straight productions with Anthony Sher or Kenneth Branagh in the principal role.

The 2025 *Much Ado about Nothing* directed by Jamie Lloyd featured Tom Hiddleston as Benedick, instructed to show off his abdominal musculature rather than his wit, and a Hero (whose modesty is a crucial feature of the original plot) made to engage from the outset in energetic twerking. Much of the play was simply ignored or replaced. The resultant singing and dancing show was nothing less than a fraud on the public. After receiving reports from two of my Shakespeare-loving children, both of whom (on separate evenings) left at half-time, I jettisoned my expensive tickets, bought long before the production opened, in despair. But at least someone of my vintage knows what he is missing; far more depressing is the fact that younger audiences are now almost completely cut off from experiencing the playwright's untrammelled imagination at work with first-class actors on a live stage. And this is Shakespeare we are talking about, universally regarded as the greatest dramatist who ever lived. It is hard to avoid sometimes wondering of modern directors: "Who the hell do these people think they are?"

I was stimulated to revisit all this just now by reading an essay in the festival programme before attending one of the operas at this year's Glyndebourne: Wagner's final stage-work *Parsifal*. It had been an early and enduring hope of the founder, John Christie, to stage this piece, but that had never happened. This year his ambition has come to pass – up to a point. Mark Ronan has already reviewed the new Glyndebourne *Parsifal* for *TheArticle* and reported boos for the production team at the curtain call. Or to put it another way – here we go again.

Now what Wagner really meant by calling *Parsifal* a "festival play for the consecration of the stage" is highly controversial. (See a previous essay for *TheArticle*.) But what is beyond doubt is that he unequivocally deployed a religious language in it, and this is what he wanted audiences to experience. Nietzsche for one thought that his invocation of a religious idiom was ultimately counterfeit. Whether he was right or wrong is a rich subject for debate, but what cannot be gainsaid is that, as conceived by the composer, who wrote all his own libretti, the characters are steeped in the forms, the observances and the symbols of religion and they transact in – or in conscious rebellion against – its single currency.

To separate the characters from religion at key moments in the action is to remove fish from water. And if you do that – excising this person making the sign of the cross at a crucial point or that one being baptised, it follows that the drama has to be re-imagined. This indeed is the director's apparent goal in the Glyndebourne *Parsifal*. The result is a production which, though intelligent and well-directed in some points of detail, is fundamentally disloyal.

Glyndebourne's new Parsifal. © Glyndebourne Productions Ltd. Photo: Richard Hubert Smith

The least evil resulting from this is that viewers cannot enter into the Nietzschean debate for themselves because it has been largely erased from what they see. (There is an image of the crucified Christ in act I, but by the end of the evening this concession feels like an isolated incongruity.) A greater wrong is that what is set before the audience is quite simply not Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* ("total work of art") but something else. The main focus here is on a reconciliation between warring brothers, who do not exist as such in the libretto. More baffling yet, one of them is clumsily confused with the Spear – a sacred relic accorded the utmost importance by Wagner's characters, albeit in this production reduced to a penknife. But the greatest evil is that there is a fundamental disjunct between what we hear in the music and words and what we see. This strikes at the heart of the whole creative enterprise, since Wagner went to the greatest possible pains to unite words, action and music. He theorised in his essays about the relationship between them and changed his mind about which was of principal importance, but that he thought they belonged inseparably together cannot be doubted. That is one reason why he used the term "music dramas" to describe his operas.

It is also why the prime function of an opera director in Wagner is always to listen to the music and to dispose of the characters on stage accordingly. In Barry Kosky's recent production of *Die Walküre* at the Royal Opera House, act I scene 1 is ruined as a spectacle by the fact that, when the orchestra is telling us that Siegmund and Sieglinde are already half in love and gazing raptly at each other, Kosky has evidently directed him not even to look at her, but instead to glug water convulsively in extended and solipsistic contemplation of his own situation, like (as one reviewer put it) some sort of PTSD victim. This blunder incidentally also drains any tension out of the ensuing scene when Sieglinde's beastly husband Hunding comes home. By the time the doomed siblings finally merge in scene 3, one feels one has been watching an episode of *Blind Date*.

When Wagner wrote about his creative processes, he said that, as he was composing a libretto – an exercise which always preceded the music – he had only a vague sense of what the notes would be (what he called a "*Duft*" or scent); yet later, when it came to putting them onto the page, he found that this was barely more than a mechanical task, for the music had already been fully composed, subconsciously, along with the words. This is perhaps one reason why the sound world of each of his music dramas (treating the *Ring* as one) is so distinctive. *Parsifal* is no exception. Ever since it was first heard in 1882, Wagnerians have especially venerated its music. The almost uniform admiration accorded to its glowing score is inseparable from the fact that the music of the outer acts, both of which depict a holy order preparing for and enacting a Eucharistic rite, adopts an unequivocally religious idiom. An audience member does not have to have any religious faith in order to be moved by what he sees; but that this representation is central to what he is supposed to experience might be thought self-evident.

The reason for the wide divergence between Wagner's conception and Glyndebourne's realisation emerges from the programme essay, which is in substance an interview by the estimable author and music journalist Jennifer Duchen of the opera's Dutch director, Jetske Mijnssen. We are told that this is Mijnssen's first foray into Wagner. (Interrogation of the biography elsewhere in the programme does not provide any clues why she might have been chosen for Glyndebourne's debut *Parsifal*.) Everyone must begin somewhere, and Mijnssen says that the initial task she set herself was to "understand the composer", which is unimpeachable. Equally confidence-building are the statements on her website that her approach is "deeply rooted in her careful musical reading of the scores". A critic is quoted there as saying that "She makes the music visible, she makes you sense the message in the music". We read that "Bringing scenic visions and music as close together as possible is Jetske Mijnssen's ideal".

Richard Wagner (1913-1883)

Nonetheless, it emerges from Duchen's essay that Mijnssen's mission to "understand the composer" has entailed an initial swerve, first in the direction of Wagner's wife Cosima and then, more dubiously yet, of Anton Chekhov. The latter is introduced on no other stated ground than that he was 22 years old in 1882, the date of *Parsifal's* premiere. Apart from this sliver of contemporaneity, it is hard to think of two creative artists less similar than Wagner and Chekhov. However, Mijnssen tells us that "I started to explore how families lived then" – troubled families being, we gather, a particular interest of the Russian playwright – "and found that there was much that connected with personal stories in my own family", in particular her great-grandmother who "grew up in a large multi-generational household".

This succession of loosely connected knight's moves brings us – incomprehensibly – to *Parsifal* conceived as domestic family drama. Whatever her own, perhaps semi-concealed, scepticism, Duchen records with a poker face the director's "quest for authentic humanity and genuine interpersonal relationships". Mijnssen continues: "It's the only way I can tell the story. I need to relate to the character. I need characters who are rounded human beings." It is at least refreshing that this director makes no bones about the fact that it's all about her (and her great-grandmother).

If only we had known earlier – before we booked our tickets. For as Richard Morrison wrote in his *Times* review: "Oh dear, she's come to the wrong opera. *Parsifal* is where you get a king eternally tormented by a wound that won't heal, or a bunch of religious zealots obsessed with the Holy Grail, or a magician who has castrated himself, or a woman tormented through centuries because she laughed at Jesus Christ. Rounded human beings these are not."

Equally to the point is the thought that if this is the "only way" in which Mijnssen was able to tell the story, one would assume that she disclosed this fact at an early stage to the artistic management at Glyndebourne. In that case, the question becomes why the opera house did not relieve her of her ill-adapted burden and retain someone with more interest in realising Wagner's conception rather than their own. Among the serious points at stake here is that most punters get to see at most a handful of performances of *Parsifal* in their lifetime, and it is an act of indifference bordering on disdain to serve up a production (top price tickets £315) which so thumbs its nose at the composer and his express intentions.

The result is that regular operagoers were left flummoxed and frustrated. The professional reviewers generally noted the ineptness of the *mise-en-scène* but registered only a muted protest; by contrast a member of the paying public on the Arts Desk website (perhaps with a less developed case of Stockholm syndrome) did not mince his words: "This is another production which is created by a director who clearly has no faith in the dramaturgy of the work and effectively decides to re-write the story, bending and stretching the text and drama so that it matches the directorial context. I was sitting next to a couple who seemed to be making their first visit to an opera let alone Wagner let alone *Parsifal*. They had done their homework, including Ernest Newman, but they had absolutely no idea what was going on. When they asked me to explain I couldn't help much. If a director thinks that a work needs to be re-written dramatically, why don't they pass on the invitation and leave it to another to produce the work which they are asked for?"

Several comments arise in relation to this pertinent critique. Some are specific to *Parsifal* itself. The present is often referred to as a post-religious age, and we need not be surprised that the current generation of directors is uncomfortable with the symbols and language of faith. It is a case of unfamiliarity breeding contempt. Even the reliable Duchen (unless she was quoting Mijnssen) seems to think that Kundry's curse was imposed because she mocked Christ "on the road to Gethsemane". Hmm – see me.

And then there is the Wagner factor itself. Here what one too often finds among directors is a deliberate, often puerile subversion of the moral seriousness of the original, part of a more generalised *ressentiment* against high culture and a post-modern desire to blaspheme and undermine, whose lynching tendency has moved on from religion to art, in an ironical echo of Wagner's famous dictum about the relation between the two. Creativity, according to this view, consists in destruction, in turning the composer inside-out, in making fun of him.

It is no coincidence that this phenomenon is most evident at Bayreuth, where the keepers of the flame gratify themselves each summer by – in DH Lawrence's phrase – "doing dirt" on it. Whilst we can immediately acquit Mijnssen of such extremism, what the two have in common is the conviction that Wagner's operas are theirs to fashion as they please, to serve their own whims however superficial, irrelevant or banal. In my *Standpoint* piece, I quoted the pianist András Schiff reproving a student in a master class for a relatively minor departure from the instructions in the score: "Bloody hell, why don't you play what Beethoven wrote? It's his music, not yours." The rebuke is just as apt in the present context.

Broader factors are at work too. It is unnecessary to chart here the baleful inheritances of deconstruction, critical theory, relativism, the repudiation of authority in all its forms and of the very notion of any hierarchy of merit. Others, notably that fine Wagnerian Roger Scruton, have done so at length, and readers will know where to find texts by him and others where

such an impoverished world view is comprehensively rejected. Things have been made worse, though, since his death in 2020 by the increasing evidence of modern technology's effect on patterns of thinking, leading to ever-greater atomisation and alienation and making sustained attention, as required by the music dramas of Wagner, harder to engage without the perceived need for bribes or gimmicks.

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The question remains why it is that the artistic managers of our theatres and opera houses so often choose directors who, as must be apparent from the outset, have no attitude of reverence or even respect for the original creation entrusted to them, but are following their own agenda. In the case of Shakespeare, there seems to be an almost universal belief that he can no longer compete on his own terms but, like the broadly contemporaneous Book of Common Prayer, must instead be brought down to the level of the modern consumer. The object is no longer to raise the consciousness of theatre-goers to the summit of Parnassus, but to bring down the latter to a comfily accessible level. Few seem to notice or mind that the view from the peak is greatly diminished.

In the opera house, a subtly different force is at work. In place of an insecurity about what the public's teeth will be able to chew, so that the production must be pre-masticated into an easily ingested purée, there is the well-established belief that audiences who choose to attend (say) a Wagner opera don't really know what they want and must therefore undergo re-education as to what is good for them. Only a self-perpetuating artistic cadre is empowered to set the terms of the regime, and a rejection of anything which smacks of following the composer's wishes is on the menu every day. If an opera is conceived as set in the Bohemian countryside or the salons of St Petersburg, the one thing which the audience is not to be indulged with is any evocation in costume or staging of either milieu. In his trenchant introduction to *Wagner's Theatre* by Patrick Carnegy, John Deathridge makes the highly revealing claim that "producers are perfectly within their rights radically to reconceive works of art against the grain of what their creators originally wanted — or rather what some members of audiences think they wanted". What contempt for the poor old opera-goer is contained in that qualification.

There are enormous challenges in putting on any Wagner opera, and no definitive answers to the choices which confront the director. But some things should be straightforward, even obvious. One such is that the archetypal characters presented by Wagner in *Parsifal* have nothing whatever to do with fraternal conflict, whether portrayed in the manner of Chekhov or anyone else. Director Mijnssen must know that as well as anybody. But in a crucial respect she does not care. Nor do the powers at Glyndebourne who commissioned her. Yet most among the paying public do. And they must make their voices heard, not perhaps with boos at the close (which however understandable are always a wretched and ungracious form of protest), but through an active, well-aimed and widespread campaign headed by critics who do not pull their punches and patrons willing to withhold their patronage. Only this will begin to disturb the elite consensus and change the way in which artistic directors are appointed and theatrical and operatic commissions awarded.

We are entitled to expect directors who are not ashamed of showing fidelity to the spirit of the original, who recognise that their own talents are of a different and lower order, that they are simply less important in the process of realisation than the playwright or composer and are there to midwife an imaginative but faithful re-creation of the original conception. And if you think that that is either too rigid a prescription or otherwise asking too much, you will surely agree that we at least deserve directors who try.

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