

OPERA NEWS

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Provoking Thought

Lydia Steier directs outside the box.

By *Charles Shafaieh*



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MART BECAME LYDIA STEIER'S IMAGINARY FRIEND when, at six years old, she watched the film *Amadeus*. Deciding then and there on an opera career, she begged her parents for scores and listened

to the film's soundtrack on repeat. "There were three different CD versions," she recalls. "I shredded those several times and had to repurchase them. I even learned how to do that trick Mozart does, playing the piano upside down!" Reflecting on her youth, she understands why the wunderkind engrossed her. "I wanted nothing to do with what other kids were doing," she says. "I sat around my room obsessing over this sort of creature who doesn't belong and just does the one thing he's done well. I found a lot of comfort in that."

Her passion took her to Oberlin Conservatory for vocal studies, but the constant feedback singers receive bothered her. "That wasn't going to be compatible, longterm, with my personality," she says. She experienced another revelation, in the school's library, upon discovering laserdiscs of productions by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle and Robert Wilson, as well as Peter Sellars's landmark Mozart–da Ponte project. "They created cognitive dissonance," she explains. "I didn't understand why the opera I saw in the U.S. was so boring—why, no matter what I was trying to do, I had to wear a corset. I began thinking I'd rather be a director of engaging, modern and relevant opera." Another trip to the library finalized that transition when she found an advertisement in opera news for Carnegie Mellon that led her to a hybrid course in opera and theater directing at the university. While there, she received advice from Jonathan Eaton, artistic and general director of Pittsburgh Festival Opera: "If you ever want to do or see anything interesting in opera, go to Europe for a while." So, on a Fulbright, she went to Germany, where she has remained for nearly two decades.

It was an ideal moment to arrive in Berlin. "The titans of the industry in Europe—Calixto Bieito, Barrie Kosky, Sebastian Baumgarten—did their first work at the Komische Oper around 2002, and I was there to learn from them," she says. The experience inspired in her the notion that "you can take classical music and turn it into something that makes you think, something that challenges you."



Steier in rehearsal in Geneva
GTG © Magali Dougados

Steier's *Zauberflöte* at the Salzburg Festival, set in Vienna just prior to World War I, turns the three boys into central characters listening to the narrative as a bedtime story about "wisdom, acceptance and finding truth." The conceit was inspired by both *The Princess Bride* and Winsor McCay's early-twentieth-century *Little Nemo* comic strips, which depict a boy who goes to sleep and experiences wild dreams filled with surreal transformations of everyday objects as well as people from his life. "We see the boys processing their day's events and their subconsciouses, and they become the audience's proxy," Steier says. Here, the poultry deliveryman becomes Papageno, and the housemaids turn into the three ladies, all enrobed in a darkly whimsical dreamworld that fuses Freud with M. C. Escher and Edward Gorey.

As the boys learn about Tamino's maturation from "a hapless prince to a man with knowledge," they experience their own, harsher, education—a loss of innocence as they bear witness to "the last moment of the Belle Époque before industrialized warfare shut down humanity's dreams.

"We have to see this piece through their eyes," says Steier, who often uses children in her work. "Kids seeing that the natural state of humanity is animalistic is such a dark picture, yet I can't imagine what our time looks like to [them]. But we're at a moment when no one can afford innocence. When the grandfather closes his storybook, their eyes are wide open. They can't sleep. And they're us. We shouldn't be able to sleep after looking at the things around us."

Deconstructing and recontextualizing an opera—in this case, through a novel setting and streamlining what Steier considers Schikaneder's "stilted, weird and racist" dialogue—is de rigueur in Germany but anathema to many Americans. "In the U.S., you just tell the story," she laments. "We constantly have to ask ourselves why we do these works now, and it can't just be to entertain old white ladies with big checkbooks who you don't want to piss off. That's no way to form a cultural fundament. That's the end of opera."



Steier's staging of *Les Indes Galantes* in Geneva, 2019
GTG © Magali Dougados

The canon, she argues, can be as illuminating as new music, but you must “go at it with your elbows and claws” to create something “relevant, powerful and sensual.” And entertainment need not be sacrificed for that cause. “You want to have your value system suspended, to question the reality that surrounds you,” Steier says. “A bit of whiplash is exciting. That’s why you go on rollercoasters. And if you seduce an audience in the first scenes with the way you tell the story, it doesn’t matter how weird or unexpected it is.” ■

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