

Regietheater in opera: **Art, or pretension?**



Saul at Glyndebourne 2015 © Bill Cooper

As tenor Christopher Gillett psyches himself up to perform in a non-traditional production of *Turandot*, wearing nothing but a pair of Y-fronts, he ponders the pros and cons of the controversial movement known as 'Regietheater'...



I'm doing [Puccini \(/uk/learn/composers/giacomo-puccini\)](http://uk/learn/composers/giacomo-puccini)'s *Turandot* quite soon, playing the elderly Emperor Altoum. If you've ever seen *Turandot*, you've probably seen him as he's usually played: long white hair, sitting on a throne looking regal, dodderly – a Chinese version of Prince Philip. But I've just discovered that in the production I'm doing, Altoum wanders around the stage in nothing but grubby Y-fronts, being completely bonkers.

[Opera Strip! Puccini's Turandot in graphic novel form \(/uk/features/series/opera-strip/puccini-turandot\)](http://uk/features/series/opera-strip/puccini-turandot)

Many of the chorus members are wrapped in clingfilm. The production is *Regietheater*, its director the somewhat notorious Calixto Bieito, who has ruffled many a traditionalist's feathers in the past at English National Opera. More surprisingly, this performance won't be happening in Germany, where they take this in their stride, but in Belfast, where I expect they might not.

I quite enjoy the game of 'Guess The Opera'

There's a bunch of people who definitely don't take this style of direction in their stride and who are becoming increasingly vocal in their objection to *Regietheater* – witness their loud objections at the opening night of The Royal Opera's *Guillaume Tell* – and who are getting quite organised. [This is their Facebook page \(https://www.facebook.com/pages/Against-Modern-Opera-Productions/146292958770872\)](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Against-Modern-Opera-Productions/146292958770872). I'm not going to tell them they're wrong. I quite enjoy the game of 'Guess The Opera' you can play when faced with a photo of writhing naked girls, a crashed helicopter and lots of upturned chairs (*Macbeth* is always a safe bet). But without seeing the performance, I'm not one to judge

whether or not it worked. Just look at Glyndebourne's current production of Handel's *Saul*. It has *Regietheater* written all over it, and yet by every account it is an absolutely extraordinary evening in the opera house and I'm cursing that I won't see it. One in the eye for the naysayers, I'd say.

But what exactly is *Regietheater* (literally 'director theatre')? It depends who you ask. Some would say it's a post-war German movement that chose to look for a deeper, psychological interpretation of classic operas using the techniques of Freud and Jung, and which broke away from the endless traditional performances which presented everything at face value. Of the art forms, opera lent itself particularly well to this re-examination because it is not rooted in realism. People are singing to each other, the plots are often fantastic and strange, and the very fact that there's a wordless orchestra playing creates another level of explorable meaning.

Other people think that *Regietheater* is nothing more than egomaniac directors assuming they know what the composer meant better than the composer himself, and messing up perfectly good masterpieces with their idiotic 'vision'.

I'm open to all ideas. If the director can convince me, I'm happy to try anything

As a European singer, I'm open to all ideas. If the director can convince me, I'm happy to try anything. American singers and audiences are schooled in a much more traditional approach and are often horrified by what goes on in Europe ('Eurotrash' is the general term they use). Put so much as a machine gun on stage in *Salome* (as Jürgen Flimm did at the Met) and you can expect a whole heap of abuse. A telephone in *The Marriage of Figaro*? 'Are you crazy? There were no telephones in Mozart's time!'

I have been in productions where I really don't get it. A transvestite prostitute and two drunk sailors in the opening of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*... really? And I've seen some doozies. *La traviata* in a tennis court, *Giulio Cesare* in fatigues, glugging his way through cans of beer... But I'm open to try anything – as long as the director can explain it properly.

Sometimes we singers are asked: 'Why on earth did you allow the director to make you do such things?' Clearly the people who ask these questions have no idea about the creative process. Quite aside from the fact that we worry about being replaced – like the soprano who asked the director why she had to sing her fiendish aria in a rowing machine: 'Because if you don't, we will find a soprano who will!' – can you imagine the rehearsal room where all you heard were singers saying 'no'?

Singers are much more open to new and bizarre ideas than actors

Despite what you may think, singers are much more open to new and bizarre ideas than actors. I've been told this by countless directors. This could be because whereas actors often only ever play a role once, in one production, singers will sing roles over and over again in lots of different versions. We have to be flexible, and we can afford the odd dud production. These days, it goes with the job.

So, when I think about the prospect of spending my evenings in *Turandot* in my knickers, I'm hugely looking forward to it. It's going to be much more interesting than wearing a ton of make-up, climbing into a big frock and sitting still for an age. And let's face it, *Turandot* may seem like like a lovely opera with a famous aria about football, but it's actually a ghastly story peopled with bizarre, selfish, bloodthirsty characters. It really should be grim and appalling.

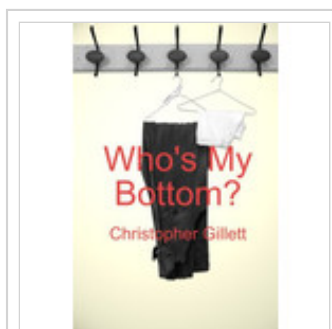
Bring on the Y-fronts!

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Read more of Christopher's musings on his blog, christophergillett.co.uk (<http://christophergillett.co.uk/>).

Recommended



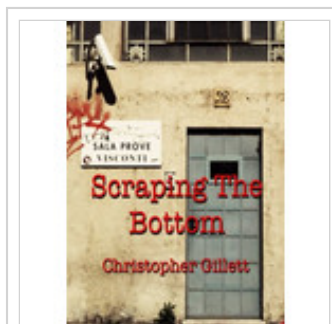
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