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. . . And in Response

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Re-reading my dramaturgical sketch for *Rheingold* three years later, and reading Nila Parly's marvellous account both of *Rheingold* and her project for realising interpretation as staging, I was again struck by the fact that dramaturgy is a matter of too much. Dramaturgy provides excess calories, silly ideas in abundance, only a small per cent of which will take form as legible gestures or images on stage. I was reminded as well that operatic dramaturgy so rarely involves acoustic matters: the most radical aspect of my sketch was embodied in the suggestion that there be an intervention in tempo and time, rather than *Personenregie* or prop design, to reflect the gravity and shock of Fasolt's death. Death on stage, even when we know it will happen, cannot shed its shock value, but in opera the presence of music tends to paper over that shock, by supplying an audible continuity that defies the caesura. In April 2009, as preparation for writing this epilogue to our project, I made sure to attend a production of *Rheingold* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and the matter of Fasolt's death asserted itself once more as significant. Fasolt was sung by Rene Pape, a marvellous luxury, since, given Pape's current superstar status as a future Wotan, singing Fasolt is too 'small' for him now. Because of this casting, the Giant's voice, and hence his passions and aspirations, predominated the field and became sympathetic against the odds. Here is a simple instance of a theatrical truth: that an idiosyncrasy in voice – unique to a particular performance – can play havoc with Wagner's racial typecasting, not to mention with the MET production's faithful images, with the giants as lumpish, dreary hulks. In the MET production, Fasolt's death happens out of sight, a piece of prudishness that misfired all the more spectacularly given that one's attention was riveted on Rene Pape: the investment in the minor character, an epiphenomenon arising from the singer's voice, was playing havoc with the staging's original dramaturgy.

This brings us to a conundrum cited by Nila Parly in her consideration of Erika Fischer-Lichte's writings on performance, in which Fischer-Lichte stresses the event character, the experiential reality and acts of live reinterpretation that characterise performance. To cite the core phrase in Parly's précis: 'a theatre performance is not limited to a series of readable signs; it also contains moments that cannot be explained as being representations of something' (see above, p. 170). At a 2008 University of Chicago symposium on the films of Andrei Tarkovsky, Irina Brown – Tarkovsky's long-time friend and disciple – told us that Tarkovsky was often asked what this or that image in his films 'meant', and that he typically replied that they did not 'mean' anything: that an image struck an observer, or frightened him or her, or enchanted that same observer, but that was not an effect mediated by meaning. These things are images, not signs. What was incidentally interesting about this comment was the indignation it aroused in the academic audience: that

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which is not decodable is not just of no use to academics: it seemingly offends against the fundamental assumptions of interpretative thought. One could add that, like the fortuitous phenomenon in performance, the uninterpretable mesmerising image in theatre or film needs no dramaturgy. Such things seem to put dramaturgy out of a job. Yet in the Copenhagen *Rheingold* project, the fact that the dramaturgical sketch itself raised questions about performance phenomenology meant that a dramaturgical calorie load – in one of those alchemical dust-ups typical of messy rehearsing – could pop up 'in disguise' later on (above, p. 171).

The critical collision between the dramaturgical sketch and the realisation, to me, was in my suggestion that Wagner's music be interfered with, at least with regard to tempo and, as it turned out, dynamics. This is the ultimate taboo. It makes for immense difficulties, and the Copenhagen conductor rejects it. But it has been broken, notably by Peter Konwitschny, whose Hamburg staging of *Die Meistersinger* in 1999 broke everything off in mid-blare before Hans Sachs's 'Hab' acht' speech in Act III, in order to allow a spoken-dialogue excursus on the painful historical resonance of what was about to be heard. Konwitschny also staged a brilliant *Don Giovanni* in Berlin in 2005–6, where the orchestral instruments gradually dropped out during the final moralising sextet, leaving the characters to finish the opera alone, their hollowness exposed in a way that made it incorrigible. There are ways to draw attention to operatic music as artifice and manipulation, however, without actually changing a note. One is lip-synching: suppose we *do* let singers move their lips to words that someone else is singing, or to mouth the words attached to a leitmotif that is now being playing only instrumentally? Or, more radically, suppose we bring on a second and third singer to double and triple up on a part at certain moments? These gestures can create an uncanny effect – as it does in the Lyon Opera's performative staging of Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* rechristened *Des Contes d'Hoffmann*, 1996). In the Act II trio, Doctor Miracolo sings his own part and lip-synchs Antonia's mother's singing, thus exposing ventriloquism by offending against its first commandment: never let them see the lips move. In other words, rather than having Alberich play a toy trombone on stage – which is a redundancy that, as Nila Parly and her team noticed, risks being unintentionally comic – have the Curse motif twitch the lips of the characters on stage into the shape of silent words they haven't heard, or do not wish to speak.

Dramaturgy occupies an odd no-man's land between theatrical practice and academic immaterialism, a territory that David Levin, almost exclusively among opera scholars, has tried to chart.[1] In Levin's work, the chart begins with some famous radical *mise en scène* – as 'interpretations' that suggest reinterpretations of the operatic text, with staging becoming in turn a text to be untangled and an inspiration for hermeneutic flight. As an insider, a working dramaturge, Levin is fully aware that interpretative thought can become legible on the stage, and that the affinities between interpretation as reading and interpretation as realisation are strong. And yet, the joker in the pack – the uninterpretable image, the demented moment in rehearsal where something arises without conscious planning – remains

[1] See David Levin, *Unsettling Opera* (Chicago, 2007).

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stubbornly outside the purview of academic work. One final concrete instance: in 2007, I disappointed an academic audience at the Harvard Humanities Center by talking about a staging I had done, then pointing out that I found both my historical and theoretical work in musicology and film, along with every good intellectual habit – rational argument, curatorial respect, and a drive for perfection and completion – to have been absolutely no use to me in this endeavour. Was that going too far? Or, in the alchemy of performance, do the oil and water mix without our needing to know how, or plan for the explosion?

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