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Katie Mitchell and Mario Frendo

A Conversation on Directing Opera

Katie Mitchell has been directing opera since 1996, when she debuted on the operatic stage with Mozart and Da Ponte's *Don Giovanni* at the Welsh National Opera. Since then, she has directed more than twenty-nine operas in major opera houses around the world. Mitchell here speaks of her directorial approach when working with the genre, addressing various aspects of interest for those who want a better grasp of the dynamics of opera-making in the twenty-first century. Ranging from the director's imprint, or signature on the work they put on the stage, to the relationships forged with people running opera institutions, Mitchell reflects on her experiences when staging opera productions. She sheds light on some fundamental differences between theatre-making and opera production, including the issue of text – the libretto, the dramatic text, and the musical score – and the very basic fact that in opera a director is working with singers, that is, with musicians whose attitude and behaviour on stage is necessarily different from that of actors in the theatre. Running throughout the conversation is Mitchell's commitment to ensure that young and contemporary audiences do not see opera as a museum artefact but as a living performative experience that resonates with the aesthetics and political imperatives of our contemporary world. She speaks of the uncompromising political imperatives that remain central to her work ethic, even if this means deserting a project before it starts, and reflects on her long-term working relations with opera institutions that are open to new and alternative approaches to opera-making strategies. Mitchell underlines her respect for the specific rules of an art form that, because of its collaborative nature, must allow more space for theatre-makers to venture within its complex performative paths if it wants to secure a place in the future. Mario Frendo is Senior Lecturer of Theatre and Performance and Head of the Department of Theatre Studies at the School of Performing Arts, University of Malta, where he is the director of CaP, a research group focusing on the links between culture and performance.

Key terms: signature, operatic text, physicality, behaviour, audience, political imperatives, institutions.

KATIE MITCHELL is today considered to be one of the most prolific theatre directors of her generation, often described as one of Europe's most highly regarded auteur directors. However, alongside her work in the theatre, Mitchell has been carving out an equally prominent profile as an opera director. With an impressive amount of twenty-nine opera productions in just over twenty years since her debut on the operatic stage in 1996, her output in this regard is worthy of attention. Mitchell comes to the opera house with the same attitude that she adopts in the theatre auditorium, characterized by an articulate and distinctive directorial approach which often led her critics to warn audiences of her 'individual style and idiosyncratic signature [that] becomes more important than the work itself'.[1] Ironically, it was exactly this 'idiosyncratic signature' that led Mitchell to the world of opera when someone who knew her work and wanted her signature invited her to direct Mozart and Lorenzo Da Ponte's *Don Giovanni*. To learn more about her approach to opera, Mario Frendo met Katie Mitchell in London in March 2018 while she was rehearsing Béla Bartók and Béla Balázs's *Bluebeard's Castle* and working on the set design for Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Die Frau Ohne Schatten*.

Mario Frendo *How did you get involved with opera and what attracted you to it?*

Katie Mitchell I wasn't attracted to it. Someone asked me to do it. Anthony Freud, who ran Welsh National Opera, invited me to do an opera after he had seen a lot of my theatre work and really liked it.[2] His request

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was to do *Don Giovanni*. So, I went in to do *Don Giovanni*, which is totally the wrong opera for me.

Why?

Well, it's right in the heart of the patriarchal repertoire. An iconic bit of misogyny. I nearly left after a week in the opera world. I hated the working practice, the atmosphere, the sort of patriarchal systems of thinking, and the lack of interest in theatre-making. I really hated it.

Did you actually feel a lack of interest in theatre-making?

Yes, and it is like that in many opera houses. Nevertheless, after the experience with *Don Giovanni*, the same person, Anthony Freud, very wisely asked me to do a Janáček masterpiece, *Jenůfa*.[3] Working on *Jenůfa* gave me a better casting opportunity, particularly because Janáček is sort of interested in spoken speech. His music isn't much far from spoken language. *Jenůfa* was the opera that really engaged me with the art form – also because it is a much better work in terms of gender politics. As far as I am aware, it is the only nineteenth-century opera with the libretto written by a woman. This makes me think of it as a mistake because Janáček just liked this play by this woman and adapted it, but it was a woman who wrote it, which makes it appear like a historical mistake.[4]

Although it was not my choice, working on *Jenůfa* was great. I really liked the experience and eventually did more work for Welsh National Opera. Very often, in fact, my work in opera is not about my choices but about people who run companies and become supporters or advocates of my work. I tend, then, to have long-term working relationships with these people and companies: Welsh National Opera, a little bit English National Opera, the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, Staatsoper in Berlin, and now the Royal Opera House. I can say that my opera career depends a lot on the working relationships established with people who know the work that I make. They understand it, they want it, and they want the signature.

Your opera work is, therefore, strongly affected by your relationship with opera institutions and people working within them. Still, I wonder whether theatre practitioners that you often mention as important references for you had any impact on the work you do in opera. I'm referring here to such practitioners as Stanislavsky, Dodin, and Bausch, who all worked on operas at some point in their working life, and the Polish theatre company Gardzienice, who are well known for their music-oriented approach to theatre.

You just mentioned some of the most important artists in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries who work so differently from each other. Still, I don't think I came to opera because of the important influences on my theatre-making of Pina, Gardzienice, or Stanislavsky. I didn't approach opera through that gateway. I approached opera because someone asked me to do it and because I really do like music. But I didn't see my key influences as having anything to do with my opera work at all.

The work of these practitioners, therefore, did not influence your opera work in any way?

The thing is that my opera work and my theatre work are not two separate things. It is an ongoing rolling project. Sometimes I'm doing the project in the opera world and sometimes in the theatre world, but the project remains the same. So the investigation remains the same. For instance, all the opera singers that turn up to my rehearsal room will be given a character biography, which is really unusual for them. They will be dealing immediately with the language of intention, event, and immediate circumstances. All of the language that resonates with Stanislavsky will be present in the room. Of course, the approach will be different from when we work in theatre, but that language will still be there. The main instruction that any opera singer gets from me will still be to make the gesture and what they do life-like and life-sized. These are the two key words: 'life-like' and 'life-sized'. No, I don't want a conventional operatic gesture from the 1940s. I want it to be life-like and life-sized. That's what I say all the time, every day.

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Considering that opera singers tend to behave in ways that are not always related to the dramatic requirements of the libretto, this must be quite a demanding instruction. Often, in fact, the stage behaviour of opera singers tends to respond more to musical rather than dramatic requirements.

Yes, this is often the case. But you have to forgive them, because they learn all that musical structure before the rehearsals begin. Also, for opera singers to produce the sound required, they have to have 50 to 60 per cent of their whole being focused on producing it. This leaves them with not so much space for the psychology, which they often access by learning the bits of music in between. That is why the music tends to be in their body, and they tend to move in the shape of the music, because of the process of learning it, which is separate from the process of rehearsing it. On the other hand, actors in theatre tend not to learn much before they start rehearsals. This for me is quite a difference in the practice between theatre and opera. The opera singer's amount of head space available for psychology is a limited headspace. As an opera director, therefore, you have to be very economical and use a very limited amount of the singers' headspace to do the acting, whereas with actors you have a hundred-per-cent availability. Mechanically, it is just very different, for psychology, for physicality, for everything.

This may explain why singers tend to have strong musical personae that define their presence when on the stage. While a strongly defined musical persona may work fine in concert recitals, it may not be as beneficial in opera performances, as it often hinders the definition of the dramatic persona that the singer is expected to generate on stage. Clearly, in opera the musical persona cannot just take over.

I think, however, that it is very hard for opera singers to avoid this.

In your opera productions that I have watched, however, I did not see much of the singers' musical personae on stage. One thing that I keep noticing in your opera work is how singers negotiate most effectively between their singing and their acting presence.

Well, let's say it isn't actors and it isn't singers. Let's say that what we see are characters in a concrete situation with a concrete dilemma. If you, as director, manage to help the singers remove the sort of awful nineteenth-century conventions that are in the singers' bodies, if you try to take the pressure off them, or, rather than take the pressure off them, if you can get them to add something into their head which isn't about singing, then you can get them to play a character in a concrete situation as if it were life-like. You can do this, but it requires very good casting because not all singers are interested in these approaches. Some singers just want to sing and are not willing to go through all this work. As a director, you have to cast very carefully and then direct very efficiently.

I wonder, in fact, whether you ever came across singers who resist your approach. I am thinking here of your 2018 Jenůfa *at the Dutch National Opera, where my impression after watching it was that there may have been some resistance in this regard.*

Some do resist me, as was indeed the case in the production you mention. The person who most rigorously followed the absolute life-size and life-like instruction was soprano Annette Dasch, who played Jenůfa. She gave a lot to the production, and suggested a lot of the actions. She was amazing, and that's because she paid attention and followed all my acting notes. Some of the other singers were not always able to take acting notes. Eventually, I found out that one of the singers who could not follow my instructions had worked with a conductor who kept insisting that singers have to keep their eyes on him and that they cannot look away. As a result, this singer was unable to break any contact with the conductor in my production, whereas Annette Dasch was able to do that. The 2018 *Jenůfa* you mention will be one of the great performances of her working life. She loved the detail that went into the work.

She also contributed most effectively towards creating a very bold Jenůfa who is, of course, a very strong character. In a way it reminds me of Lucia

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in Lucia di Lammermoor, *which you also directed.*[5] *In both, but perhaps more prominently in the case of* Lucia, *your interventions on the dramatic narrative are rather conspicuous.*

Yes, because I think there is a base problem here, in that the representations of women from other historical periods in opera are, by our modern-day standards, very poor. As a woman, going to watch an opera, I am made angry or embarrassed by the representations of women. Of course, this isn't helped by the fact that most operas are made by men in a very patriarchal and old-fashioned way of thinking. So, when I make opera work, I try to bring my own gender politics to it, or the gender politics of the time. With *Lucia* I considered what women today – young, middle-aged, and old – watching Lucia as she is portrayed would feel: What bridge with their own world would they like to build? What offer would they expect of a representation that is slightly more respectful of their experience as women? That was my main aim in *Lucia.* Also, the opera is called *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and I noticed that Lucia is not present in a lot of the scenes. And I thought: That is not so good. Why is the heroine absent from a lot of scenes? Then, the other thing I thought was: Why does she go mad? It is not enough to kill your husband to send you mad. There must be another reason to send her mind off, and I was interested what this could possibly be.

Actually, it was Diana Damrau and I who came up with the idea of the miscarriage.[6] It was, therefore, a shared idea, which emerged because as women we were both asking ourselves the same questions. You have to remember that because it is mostly men writing librettos, men composing music, and then, again, men directing productions, any semblance of female experience – in a really deep three-dimensional way – is going to be rare. I am not saying that men cannot represent female experience. I am not saying that. In fact, sometimes there are wonderful aberrations in this regard. But men from the nineteenth century representing female experience today? I think that is a bit tricky.

Since we are speaking about interventions on the dramatic narrative, it is worth noting that when Lucia di Lammermoor *was premiered in 1835, the Mad Scene was not central to the dramatic action. It would develop into a key moment only later on, through interventions by women who sang the part, and this, arguably, happened for musical rather than dramatic reasons. The Mad Scene is essentially a virtuoso cadenza intended to showcase the technical prowess of the leading soprano.*[7]

That is interesting, yes. In fact, thinking about it, there is theatrically still no reason for Lucia to go mad, which explains why we felt the need to insert the miscarriage idea as an added layer to the overall dramatic narrative.

This brings me to the issue of text in opera. Now we have two texts, not just one – the libretto as a dramatic text and the music score as a musical text. In terms of the development of dramatic action, both are important, and I guess that establishing the right balance between the two is crucial.

The problem here is that we are saying that the libretto is a dramatic text, and I question that. With some operas it is – for instance, in the case of *Lucia* the libretto is a really good dramatic text. This, however, is not always the case. Some librettos are not necessarily brilliant dramas. Take Mozart and Da Ponte's *Così fan tutte.* If you scrape the music off, you're left with crap drama. It's really poor drama. My point here is that, as a director going in to work on an opera, you don't always have brilliant drama and brilliant music. Sometimes you have dreadful drama and brilliant music, and as a director you have to do something about it.

Did you do Così fan tutte*?*

I was asked to do it. I presented my concept for it and was sacked.

Where did this happen?

It was a co-production between English National Opera and the Metropolitan Opera, New York.

Why where you sacked?

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That's for you to ask them. I mean, I said to them that if you're going to direct *Così*, the thing you've got to deal with is the misogyny. That's it. That's the job of the director. I can't think of any other way to make that plot credible. It's not acceptable today to say the music is beautiful and that licenses the misogyny. Although it is the position of a lot of people in the field, it still remains an unacceptable political position. For me at least – and I'm sure for a lot of young people, and, indeed, not only young people. And that's quite troubling.

So how would you tackle an opera like Così *if you had to do it?*

I've got a way of how it can be performed in a relevant way today. In fact, I had an interesting idea: I think. I would set in the 1970s where the audience can see the backstage area and the onstage area. Then, through trickery, the singer playing Despina walks off complaining of the sexism, saying, 'I'm no longer going to do it.' An understudy is thrown in to play the role, with all the backstage – which is visible to the audience – having to cope with her. Then she breaks free and she streaks across with a big banner saying 'THIS IS SEXISM!' In a very playful way, I would have the performers critiquing the misogyny. This would still allow for the beauty of the music to shine through, but would just put a little frame there that acknowledges that gender politics exist. That women as human beings exist.

In a way, what you are doing with this idea for Così *is intervening at a narrative level while still working on the relationship between the dramatic text and the musical text.*

For me, the dramatic and musical texts are not two things, they are one thing. That's the point. The dramatic text moves in time to the music, so the two cannot be considered as separate things. It is a false premise to consider them as two. As a theatre director, you have to keep in mind one thing: what the audience sees and hears. That's all there is. In opera what the audience are hearing goes in a different time than in theatre. This is really the deep difference between opera and theatre, and what distinguishes the two art forms. The challenge in opera is coping with the speed at which things are sung, and the gaps in between the things that are sung. You need to be constantly aware of these gaps because normally there would not be so many pauses in a play-text. This is why I think it is false, and not useful, to see the music and the dramatic text as two separate objects. They are one coherent, dynamic, and challenging unit. As a director, you are not alone working on an opera. I am always working with the conductor. That's two of us that have to work on it. Opera's very nature is essentially collaborative. As a director, you cannot make opera without collaboration with the conductor. Often it is very troubling and difficult to find a shared sense of purpose, but you have to work with the conductor.

Stanislavsky, in My Life in Art, *actually comments about this when he says that 'to improve the dramatic aspect of opera it was necessary, above all, to reconcile the conductor, the director, and the singers, who were often at war, since each of them wanted to come first'.*[8]

Well, yes, because there is a spectrum of different types of directors as there is a spectrum of different types of conductors. It is a very wide field. What you hope for is a conductor who is going to work alongside the visual and dramatic needs. So you are looking for collaboration. Intimate collaboration. Then you can work together to create the best possible outcome that realizes the musical imperatives as well as the dramatic imperatives. This would be the most positive and ideal situation. At the other end, obviously, there are the very negative experiences where inevitably conductors are 90 per cent interested in the musical output and 10 per cent in the drama. These conductors actually do not feel that the drama is necessary. For them, really, you are there to put clothes on a concert. Just to dress the concert up. I've experienced all kinds of conductors in the twenty-nine operas that I have done. I've had my full range of experiences. Of course, the experience I most hope for is one of

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fun collaboration, because without that it's very hard.

I would like to go back to tempo for a moment, and to your reference that the dramatic text moves in time to the music. One of the concepts you develop in The Director's Craft *is that of 'character tempo', which you define as 'the speed at which the character thinks and does things physically'.*[9] *What I find interesting in this definition is the importance you attach to the physical aspect of tempo.*

Yes, but, in opera the composer has made that decision for me. As director, I cannot make that decision. I am inside the composer's tempo.

We cannot, therefore, speak in terms of dramatic tempo and musical tempo?

No. There is only one tempo in opera. It is the tempo the music is at, and there is a minuscule range of slow and fast, which, as director, you can manoeuvre with. You cannot, for instance, take an aria two minutes slower or faster, as this will kill it structurally. It will not be singable, and the musical structure will collapse. Your margins for tempo changes are minuscule in opera. You are inside a non-selected tempo. Normally in theatre, the director selects the tempo together with the actor. In opera, the composer has selected the tempo. Every art form has its rules. In opera, rule number one is that you are inside the musical structure, and the tempi decided by the composer plus the conductor. Even the conductor, however, is quite limited in this regard. There is a limit with tempo and it is pretty narrow. Obviously, some conductors can go very, very fast. I would say, in fact, that one of the more troubled territories between the conductor and the director is the area of tempo.

The *main* issue, which is the *hidden* issue – and you only know this when you've made lots of opera – is that the conductor performs the opera while the director doesn't. This means that the director has the privilege of a more objective non-performative eye. The conductor is always performing, and therefore cannot have the objectivity required to necessarily assess the choices. I mean, conductors are very skilled, but they are still performing, which puts them in a subjective relationship to what they are doing. With the director this never happens, and that is *such* a difference. When you've got a lot of adrenalin you experience time differently. This impacts on conductors, and their time measurements vary. You go to them and tell them that they directed a section so slowly, and they say, 'No, I just did it like I normally do.' They really can't have the measure of it. Of course, for them as performers, there can still be a level of objectivity, but not that cold objectivity of the director. As director, I am not analyzing what *I* am doing as I'm not involved in the performance.

What you articulate here is important in terms of the performance dynamics of the work, because often the music, also through the tempo established at the outset, sets the atmosphere and mood of the work. Jenůfa, *for instance, opens with a quick-paced, urgent, and anxious introduction consisting of musical gestures that establish the mood of what is to come.*

In the case of *Jenůfa* what Janáček is imagining is literally watching a mill-wheel turn, and we didn't do that. We do a picture that is completely against that. But yes, the music does give a certain feel of the tempo, and it's got an atmosphere attached to it that you can talk about. What you see happening, however, can be anything, even though it has to have a relationship to the sound. When I think about sound in opera, I don't understand it as a narrative dramatic thing. It's just slabs of music that change their texture and colour. The image I have is of different colours that change – to green, to purple, to blue, and then to red – and I have to match them. I know this may not sound right but, for me, it is like a soundtrack, and I am matching the film to that soundtrack. This sounds like I'm demeaning the composition, and I am, of course, not doing that. It is like someone has created the most extraordinary musical landscape, and I experience it mainly abstractly, which means that I am not thinking so much of what is being said. I then try to put the best film possible to that music.

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It actually seems to me that you are giving the music more importance than just being a text.

The music *is* the thing. The audience cannot understand most of what the singers are singing – which is why they have surtitles, although no one really admits this. What the audience are experiencing is abstract sound: profound and amazing clusters of abstract sound, really beautiful sounds.

As director, I've got my political imperatives, which are to build bridges between the historical period and now, so that people that are watching the opera now can have a relationship to what is going on. And then, the main thing I'm experiencing is the music, because the libretto is buried in it, even though, as it is mostly the case, the libretto generates the music. This is a bit like the case with Descartes, who has suggested that there is a separation between the mind and the emotions, while contemporary neuroscientists, like Antonio Damasio, say that they are actually inseparable. With opera it's the same – if someone has proposed that there is a separation between the text or libretto and the music, I don't think there is. In terms of the making, the sensation, and the experiencing of it, they are not separable.

It's interesting that you mention René Descartes, because opera, as an early modern art form, developed in parallel to the emergence of the Cartesian dichotomy between mind and body. Now we're here discussing opera at a time when Descartes' dualism has been rejected.

Yes, because it is not how we experience things. And that's the thng: even if someone gives you that dichotomy, you feel a bit uncomfortable because you know that your experience is *not* that. When you're experiencing opera, it is very hard sometimes to understand what someone is literally saying. Yet you don't mind, and it is OK for you, as you are still experiencing the opera. Sometimes you hear the lyrics really clearly, but sometimes you don't. As a director approaching opera, because of the fact that the dramatic text goes in and out of focus, you can't rely on it as a tool like you would normally do in theatre. So you have to offer something else, and what I offer to opera is behaviour and action.

I want someone who doesn't know a thing about opera to come and watch a performance and find it really engaging. I want the audience to engage with real situations and real problems that people are dealing with, so that they don't even notice that the singers are singing. You may have noticed that the main thing that I use in opera is props. *Jenůfa* is a really good example. We use masses of props there, as we do in *Lucia*, where, again, you can notice the amounts of props being used. Props give gestures the concreteness that is often lost with the singing. They give to gesture that life-like and life-sized concreteness that the audience can follow.

It is clear that playing with props is a directorial input from your part to help the singers be more in character while they are singing, and to balance better their singing with their acting. As we discussed earlier, it can't be easy for singers to act while singing what at times are extremely demanding musical scores?

The thing is that singers are paid to sing, and most people come to the opera for the singing, not the acting. The audience would still be happy if the acting isn't offered, as they can have a great time with the singing. Still, I think it is important to see what we mean by 'acting'. We don't mean a few conventional nineteenth-century gestures. We mean detailed, complex representation of behaviour and psychology. That's what I mean by acting. Some singers do not see the need to continue developing their acting skills because they are good singers and that is enough for them. The question to ask here is: Do opera houses and opera-house audiences really want much of the acting? I'm not certain they do. I think they may want less. But then, to keep opera alive it *has* to be modernized, and therefore it *has* to be imagined by contemporary theatre people. That is the problem. That is why we are here in the field. And ours is quite an embattled situation, because audiences often don't even want you to be directing the show like that. Some of them perhaps do. But some definitely don't, and they are very loud about not wanting it – they make loud noises and they boo at the ending in order to make it clear.

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You're right that those who want to retain the status quo in opera are usually very loud about it. However, there are opera institutions who want to see a difference in the way opera is made and people who are very selective where to watch it.

Sure there are. In fact I have done some of my best work at the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence.[10] The thing is that there is not much critical inquiry going on in this regard, and on the way opera is made.

In fact, speaking of the dynamics of opera-making, I am struck by your idea of simultaneous action, which I consider as a rather bold theatrical gesture of considerable structural and dramatic relevance. What you do is more than just splitting the screen, as now, to use your own words, you give the audience 'two simultaneous things to watch'.[11] *You use simultaneous action quite a lot in fact. I have seen it in your* Written on Skin, Lucia di Lammermoor, *and* Jenůfa.

Yes, I've done it a lot in opera. And you know why I do it? Because the music takes so long for the singers to say everything that actually I have got too much time on my hands dramatically. By having simultaneous scenes, I can fill all of the music. If I just hold to one setting – one situation – I'll be really struggling to fill it with drama, because the music goes so slowly and there are all these long gaps. So, using simultaneous environments makes it easier for me to fill the music. In *Written on Skin*, for instance, it's simultaneous action throughout. You have a pause downstairs with the Protector and Agnès, and upstairs someone in slow motion is filling that gap. Precisely in that gap, they move across in slow motion and put down a vase of flowers. Just as you, as viewer, have a gap, your eye is given something so that you do not notice that dramatic overlong pause.

Some newspaper reviewers found your simultaneous action strategy 'distracting'.[12] *I cannot say I found it distracting at all when I watched your performances. I rather thought it contributes to wards an augmented spectatorial engagement for the audience. It is, theatrically speaking, an added layer that gives a different dimension to spectating.*

Yes, and dramatically I think it's a bit more dynamic. In *Lucia*, for instance, the music repeats again and again the same thing quite a lot, and often it takes a long time to say one thing. With what we propose, the audience can choose where to look, instead of being forced to look in one direction. This makes for a better drama, I would say.

We could also add that the notion of simultaneity should not be such an alerting and concerning issue, considering that in today's world it is something we constantly live with – from smart television sets with multi-view functions to our computer monitors which are hardly ever showing one window at a time. This makes me wonder whether you would consider simultaneous *action as a relevant theatrical element in the development of contemporary opera-making by means of enhancing the performative experience of a work.*

Yes, totally. Also because I am really interested in a younger audience, and there is no way they are going to sit through a very slow static non-dramatic scene that is sung for a long period of, say, fifteen minutes. The young have a higher expectation of live performance, and they have it in theatre as well. Of course, we can keep playing to older audiences, but the audience we need to secure is the younger one.

I guess that much of all this depends on whether opera-making institutions are collaborative and open to change. In an interview you gave to the Guardian *in 2018, you acknowledge that 'the freedom to raise such questions of representation is tied up in how institutions such as the Royal Opera House operate'.*[13] *In the same interview, you also give importance to the type of conversations that as stage director you have with those running these institutions. In other words, you give weight to the relationship between institutions and theatre-makers in a way that would include the theatre director as co-creator in the opera-making process. This is an alternative perspective to the otherwise exclusive and, I would say, nineteenth-century focus on the composer-librettist duopoly. It seems to me that what you are suggesting is that improvement in contemporary opera-making also depends on the type of discussions that the theatre director could have with opera institutions.*

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But it's true. I think there are many radical opera houses and more traditional ones. I also think that there are traditional opera houses that are trying to be more radical. I would say that the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence under Bernard Foccroulle was very radical, very free, and very open to lots of different ways of thinking, as was the Dutch National Opera under Pierre Audi. The Royal Opera House, now under the direction of Oliver Mears, wants to embrace different ways of thinking and imagining opera to secure a place in the future.[14] So, I think there is a shift towards more openness and towards giving theatre people more status (for want of a better word) in the transaction of making an opera. But, there is still a long way to go probably.

It may still be a long way to go with opera. However, we are at a point where a lot of weight has been shifted from the author's desk to the practitioner's studio.

But that's not in the mainstream, though. You are talking about a more alternative theatre scene that loses funding in the process and often dies off. So it is the mainstream that you want to change.

Agreed. It is the mainstream that one would want to see changing. Still, I feel comfortable to argue that there are theatre-makers, like yourself, who manage to penetrate the mainstream with ideas that are risky and which they know how to somehow make them work within a context that may not be immediately embracing.

Yes. However, that normally requires imagination from the employer. That's why I'm saying that all my experiences evolved around long-term working relationships with artistic directors of opera houses. Out of that comes confidence and trust, which is then followed by the evolution of practice. My long-term seven-year collaboration with the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence led, for instance, to a lot of development of women's opera-making workshops and imperatives. The organization of the Festival offered itself up for unconscious gender-bias training and re-imagining of things from that point of view and also form a diversity point of view. So, with the right commitment, it is possible. I suppose the thing that I do note is that there aren't any senior female practitioners in the opera world. I think we all probably notice that. And, If I had anything to offer beyond making the shows that I make, I would like to offer a benevolent quiet request for more women to be trained up in opera practice to head towards parity. I think it would be very useful if we could find a way of creating that.

Notes and References

1. Michael Billington, 'Don't Let Auteurs Take Over in the Theatre', *Guardian*, 14 April 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2009/apr/14/auteur-theatre>, (accessed 9 November 2020).

2. Anthony Freud is the current General Director of the Lyric Opera of Chicago and was the General Director of the Welsh National Opera between 1994 and 2005. Freud invited Mitchell to direct *Don Giovanni* at the Welsh National Opera in 1996.

3. *Jenůfa* – composed between 1894 and 1902, and premiered in 1904 – is a three-act opera with music by Czech composer Leoš Janáček (1854–1928) and a libretto by Czech writer and playwright Gabriela Preissová (1862–1946). The opera follows a realist idiom with music characterized by every-day speech inflections resulting from the composer's peculiar compositional style of speech-melody. Preissová's libretto, based on her own play *Jeri pastokyňa*, is written in prose. Similar to other works by Preissová, it follows a Russian naturalist style, which was considered as daring within her contemporary Czech context.

4. As a matter of fact, Janáček was not the only composer working with a female librettist. There was quite a concentration of operas with librettos by female authors produced in Bohemia at the time. Marie Červinková-Riegrová (1854–1895) wrote the libretto for *Dimitrij*, an 1882 four-act grand opera with music by Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904). Eliška Krásnohorská (1847–1926) wrote the librettos for three operas with music by Bedřich Smetana (1824–1884) – *The Kiss* (1876), *The Secret* (1878), and *The Devil's Wall* (1882) – and was working with the composer on *Viola*, an opera that was left incomplete on the composer's death. Krásnohorská also wrote the libretto for *Blaník* (1887), with music by Zdeněk Fibich (1850–1900). Fibich collaborated with another female writer, Anežka Schulzová (1868–1905), who wrote librettos for three operas with his music: *Hedy* (1896), *Šárka* (1897), and *The Fall of Arkun* (1900). My clarification here does not remove any weight from Mitchell's claim when she considers an opera with a libretto by a women in the nineteenth century as a 'historical mistake'. This concentration of women librettists in Bohemia between 1880 and 1900 was a rather curious and isolated phenomenon as female librettists were not a common occurrence in the nineteenth century.

5. Mitchell first directed Gaetano Donizetti and Salvadore Cammarano's *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) at the Royal Opera House in London in 2016, followed by a revival in 2017 at the same opera house. Mitchell directed the opera again at the Greek National Opera in Athens in

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2018, which was also followed by a revival in 2019. In this article, references are to the 2016 production at the Royal Opera House.

6. Soprano Diana Damrau played the role of Lucia in Mitchell's 2016 production at the Royal Opera House. In Cammarano's libretto there is no reference to Lucia's miscarriage, which Mitchell inserts in her version.

7. I discuss the Mad Scene in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and the way it was made famous through interventions by such sopranos as Nellie Melba, Maria Callas, and Joan Sutherland, in Mario Frendo, 'Opera's Second Life: Katie Mitchell's Contributions to Contemporary Opera Making', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, XXX, No. 2 (June 2020), p. 211–25. For a more detailed account of the origins of the Mad Scene cadenza, see Romana Margherita Pugliese, 'The Origins of *Lucia di Lammermoor*'s Cadenza', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, XVI, No. 1 (March 2004), p. 12–42.

8. Konstantin Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, trans. Jean Benedetti (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 331.

9. Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 160.

10. Mitchell's first opera at the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence was George Benjamin and Martin Crimp's *Written on Skin* in 2012. This was followed by Vasco Mendonça and Sam Holcroft's *The House Taken Over* in 2013; *Trauernacht*, consisting of a staged rendition of cantatas by J. S. Bach, in 2014; George Frederick Handel's *Alcina* in 2015; Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 2016; and Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Ariadne auf Naxos* in 2018.

11. The Royal Opera House YouTube Channel, *Lucia di Lammermoor Insight* (2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76726__eeV0> (accessed 8 November 2020).

12. Fiona Maddocks, in her review for the *Guardian*, writes: 'This was the production's fatal flaw. Repeatedly the action listed from one side of the stage to the other . . . Worse, attention was drawn constantly to another part of the stage, tearing us from the singer, usually poor Castronovo, who has a powerful, alluring voice but had to battle with compulsive distractions': Maddocks, 'Lucia di Lammermoor Review – 'Flawed but Full of Provocative Thought', *Guardian*, 10 April 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/apr/10/lucia-di-lammermoor-review-royal-opera-katie-mitchell-diana-damrau> (accessed 8 November 2020). George Hall reports in *The Stage*: 'In any event there was a good deal of booing for the production team at their curtain call. Much of this is surely down to Mitchell's split screen approach, whereby the audience sees not only the characters meant to be singing at any given moment, but what is happening simultaneously offstage. The effect is hugely distracting': Hall, 'Lucia di Lammermoor', *The Stage*, 7 April 2016, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/katie-mitchell-directs-lucia-di-lammermoor-review-at-the-royal-opera-house-london> (accessed 8 November 2020).

13. In Andrew Male, 'Katie Mitchell on ROH's Brutal New Opera: "There is Optimism – for 10 Seconds"', *Guardian*, 6 May 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/may/06/katie-mitchell-royal-opera-house-lessons-in-love-and-violence> (accessed 8 November 2020).

14. Bernard Foccroulle was Artistic Director of the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence between 2007 and 2018. Pierre Audi was Artistic Director of the Dutch Opera House for three decades between 1988 and 2017. In 2019, Audi took over from Foccroulle at the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence. Oliver Mears was appointed Director of Opera at the Royal Opera House in 2017.

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