

Italian Director Brings 'Don Carlos' to Mariinsky

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Sketches of the costume designs for the new production of "Don Carlos."

ST. PETERSBURG — Video art meets period costumes and psychological drama in the new production of "Don Carlos," one of Giuseppe Verdi's darkest operas, which premieres on Thursday at the Mariinsky Theater.

For the renowned Italian director Giorgio Barberio Corsetti, fusing modern technology with historical accuracy is something of a signature style. In his rendering of "Don Carlos" at the Mariinsky, Corsetti will serve up a visual feast, a blend of period drama and timeless nightmare.

Whether the Mariinsky production is a must-hear, only the premiere will tell, but the show's concept suggests that the production is definitely a must-see.

"Don Carlos" is often referred to as the "Hamlet" of Italian opera. Grand in many senses,

from the score to the plot, it explores both existential and political issues, from the confrontation between the state and clerics, to the relationship between father and son, to the eternal alliance of jealousy and revenge.

"This opera explores the mysteries of the human mind," Corsetti said, speaking to The Moscow Times between rehearsals at the Mariinsky Theater on Sunday.

"Black is a key color for my staging, and one of the central images is the façade of a building and a courtyard with the tomb of Charles V projected onto the back wall," he said. "The projections will change their angle and position as the story evolves."

In "Don Carlos," Corsetti employs video art for a number of purposes, with the main task being to illustrate the emotions of the main characters, showing what is happening in their minds and enabling the audience to penetrate the psyche of the protagonists.

Set in 16th-century France and Spain against the backdrop of the Spanish Inquisition, the opera tells the story of Don Carlos's doomed love for Elisabeth, who is initially betrothed to him but is instead obliged to marry Don Carlos's father, Filippo, out of political expediency. Don Carlos is adored by Princess Eboli, but he ignores her as he cannot renounce his love for Elisabeth, and eventually his passion is discovered by Filippo. What lies in store for the main characters is lost or unrequited love, death and alienation.

Corsetti has first-hand experience of being on stage with the Mariinsky's indefatigable artistic director Valery Gergiev: In 2011 the two artists created a production of Giacomo Puccini's opera "Turandot" for Milan's La Scala theater. The staging was the La Scala debut of both Gergiev and Corsetti.

After "Don Carlos," the conductor and the director look forward to working together on another Verdi opera, "Othello," also to be staged at La Scala.

Some operas are easier than others for stage directors to transpose into a modern or universal setting, to move to a different country or another century. In "Don Carlos," the territory is very clearly marked both geographically and historically: The inquisition theme features prominently, while the Grand Inquisitor himself is an important character.

"The grand inquisitor is a spiritual leader. After all, in the opera, he is faced with the Herculean task of calming the enraged crowds," Corsetti said.

Is this contextual clarity an asset to the director or does he consider it a limitation?

"I could have moved it to a different place or another era if I had wanted to, but I deliberately decided to stick to the original frame, as it is essential to deliver my vision of the subject," Corsetti said. "One should really distinguish between an opera and a documentary; it is fruitless and pointless to expect an opera to reflect reality. Opera deals with human dreams and fantasies, it explores the emotional and the spiritual worlds, and in this sense it speaks directly to the souls of the people sitting in the audience."

Rehearsing the main roles are Avgust Amonov, Akhmed Agadi, Viktoria Yastrebova, Anna Markarova, Yevgeny Nikitin and Mikhail Petrenko.

From 1999 to 2005, Corsetti was responsible for the performing arts section at the prestigious Venice Biennale, and then moved on to work as head of the Theater and Dance division of the Auditorium Parco della Musica in Rome, where he created three festivals based on new circus, dance and performing arts. Now he runs Fattore K, his own theatrical company.

The letter K in the company title hints at the director's artistic preferences and tastes. "It could refer to, say, the filmmaker Takeshi Kitano and the writer Franz Kafka," the director smiles.

In a sense, the location of the company's shows are liquid: Every act of a staging is often performed at a different venue, from an abandoned industrial building or a park to a courtyard or a church, with the audiences migrating from place to place and following the itinerant troupe around. This active form of enjoying a theater production might well delight Russian audiences if it were adopted here — in Russia, a visit to a theatrical show is traditionally viewed as a static experience, with members of the audience being confined to their chairs and requested to remain quiet.

As the troupe's name suggests, Corsetti is fascinated by the works of Kafka. One of Corsetti's most recent stagings was a rendition of Kafka's "The Castle" that he produced for the respected Il Spoleto music festival in Italy in 2011.

"I admire Kafka most for his paradoxes," Corsetti said. "It presents a particular challenge for a stage director to give a visual dimension to literary images and verbal paradoxes."

In light of this statement, it is easy to see why Corsetti feels so comfortable in Russia, which is frequently described as one of the world's most Kafkaesque destinations.

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