

Circus-Themed 'Rigoletto' Unlike Any Seen at Bolshoi Theater

By [Raymond Stults](#)

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Giuseppe Verdi's immensely popular opera "Rigoletto" returned to the Bolshoi Theater earlier this month, after an absence of 25 years, in a staging by Canadian director Robert Carsen co-produced by the Bolshoi, the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, in France, where it originated in the summer of 2013, and the opera houses of Brussels, Strasbourg and Geneva.

The Bolshoi played host to the Russian premiere of "Rigoletto" in 1859 and over the next 130 years the opera went on to become one of the theater's most-performed works, appearing nearly 1,600 times in 11 different stagings.

To say that Carsen's production is unlike any seen before at the Bolshoi would amount to a gross understatement. Moving the action from its original locale, the 16th-century ducal court of Mantua, in northern Italy, to a modern-day circus arena, Carsen has turned the libidinous Duke into an equally libidinous circus director and the court jester, Rigoletto, into a clown.

The setting of "Rigoletto" has often been changed in modern times, most notably perhaps in the highly acclaimed London production of three decades ago directed by Jonathan Miller, which very effectively placed its action in the milieu of New York's mafia. Even Verdi himself was forced to change the opera's locale prior its 1851 premiere at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice. The city was then under the rule of Austria and the Austrian censors took exception to the original libretto, based on Victor Hugo's play "Le roi s'amuse" (The King Has Fun), which seemed to them potentially subversive in its depiction of the follies of an august royal personage, French King Francis I.

Carsen's relocation of "Rigoletto" inevitably brought to mind English director David Pountney's misbegotten staging of Georges Bizet's "Carmen," premiered at the Bolshoi in 2008 and now mercifully discarded, which attempted to squeeze the opera's entire action into the cigarette factory where the heroine is employed.

Though Carsen seemed unable in published interviews to give any truly compelling reason for placing the opera in circus, he by no means did the sort of harm perpetrated by Pountney — at least until the third and final act.

The brief first scene of "Rigoletto" is a riot of action, complete with acrobats, dancers and prostitutes, the last of whom entirely discard their upper garments and eventually appear to copulate with members of the Duke's entourage. Nevertheless, the scene clearly sets the stage for the tragic ending to follow.

In Act I's second scene, as well as Act II, Carsen rather flubs some important dramatic points, but still narrates the story quite well. Act III, however, simply doesn't fit into the director's circus scheme. The libretto places the act in the run-down riverside inn of the assassin Sparafucile. For that, the production substitutes a circle of rope ladders hung from the circus arena's ceiling. And almost everything else about the scene runs counter to the libretto and to Verdi's mostly dark and brooding score. Worst of all are the final moments between Rigoletto and his dying daughter Gilda, one of the most moving and intimate episodes in all of Verdi's operas, which plays out on the circus floor in full view of the Duke's entourage.

To conduct "Rigoletto," the Bolshoi engaged prominent Italian conductor Evelino Pido, who encountered certain difficulties in coordinating his forces and for whom the orchestra played rather insensitively at times.

The principal treat vocally on opening night was the Duke of Sergei Romanovsky, who, after a brief stint with Novaya Opera, left Russia in 2009 to pursue a career abroad. His bright, technically secure lyric tenor proved a near-perfect fit to the music, marred only by a few cracked high notes. And he played the philandering Duke with enormous gusto and conviction.

Kristina Mkhitarian, a member of the Bolshoi's Young Opera Artists Program, showed considerable potential in her sympathetic account of the doomed Gilda, though she lacked, on opening night at least, the pure, bell-like high notes heard from the part's finest interpreters.

The vocal disappointment of the evening was the Rigoletto of Greek baritone Dimitris Tiliakos, who seemed to possess several different voices, principal among them an only

intermittently full-bodied sound in the mid-range of a sort that marks the true "Verdi baritone" and rather weak and fluttering notes in music's upper reaches. As a result, Rigoletto's biggest moments, his two overwhelmingly dramatic arias and his contribution to the three duets with Gilda, proved so lacking in impact that I left the theater hardly recalling them at all. To his credit, however, Tiliakos acted the part with great dexterity.

"Rigoletto" next plays April 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 at 7 p.m. New Stage of the Bolshoi Theater. 1 Teatralnaya Ploshchad. Metro Teatralnaya.

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