



## Interview with Director and Scenic Designer Thaddeus Strassberger

(by Michael Solomon, Washington National Opera)

*Q. At the time Verdi wrote Nabucco, opera was a political and social force that blanketed the culture, much like the Super Bowl or the Academy Awards do today. Do you think opera has lost its cultural relevancy in this regard? How can it regain its prominence in popular culture?*

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, opera was often an intensely local phenomenon. Many new works were commissioned by Teatro alla Scala each season, and the public expected something new, spectacular and engaging every time they went to the opera house. There were favourite stars in both the opera and ballet companies that the audiences were eager to see in new roles – and as there was no recording technology at the time, of course, hearing and seeing an opera was by definition a social and participatory event. The ideas explored in each piece and the nuances of the performances were experienced by audiences collectively. There was plenty of time to interact socially as the performances were structured with more intermissions than is customary today, and often with an accompanying ballet or even another short opera in the same evening, meaning that you could arrive at the theater at 6 o'clock and still be there well after midnight. Opinions and observations were shared right away, and the ovations or criticisms hurled at the stage with an immediacy that seems rarer today.

In my productions, I strive to create an atmosphere conducive to starting a dialog with the public about the themes presented by the opera. A discussion is more interesting to me than a diatribe, and I think that is something that is sorely lacking in other forms of media at the moment. The popular perception that opera is elitist and exclusive is simply wrong – sporting events and concerts often cost much more than an opera ticket – and the best way to overcome it is by encouraging (and funding!) access to the opera house to wider audiences. Opera cannot be experienced in its full force anywhere but in a live performance. My first experience seeing an opera was through my elementary school music class working in conjunction with the local opera company to show a “behind the scenes” look at a dress rehearsal. If schools put as much time, money and effort into arts education as they do sports, I believe our country would be richer and more productive in my senses of those words.

*Q. Nabucco was only Verdi's third opera. What are the hallmarks of Verdi's later classic style that are evident in this early work?*

As a director and designer I find that his sense of scale throughout the arc of each opera to be really well thought out. Trusting his ability to create a huge background of sound and spectacle to set a scene – and then to pull it right down to the equivalent of an intimately whispered soliloquy – pays dividends to the singing, orchestra and staging. The contours of the dynamics have to be reinforced and not flattened out to create their maximum effect, and this is as true with his earliest works as it is for *Aida* or *Otello*, which he composed much later in his career.

*Q. There are few operas in which the chorus plays such a centrally important role as in Nabucco. Verdi was even called “il padre del coro.” How does your production involve the chorus in new ways?*

The characters in many of Verdi's operas act in ways contrary to the social norms of their settings. The chorus serves as a living, breathing manifestation of the customs, habits, religious beliefs and rituals of the world that is frequently inhospitable and even downright hostile to the hopes and desires of the protagonists. This opera depicts two warring nations, religions and races, but Verdi and the librettist Solera give them some strikingly

similar characteristics which I think is not a stylistic limitation, but rather an illustration that there must be more of a common humanity that unites them rather than focus on the superficial differences that seem to separate them.

*Q. There's a lot of mythology surrounding Nabucco's role in the history of the unification of Italy. What does your production say about this?*

The history of nation-building and cultural identity is never clear-cut and linear whether in Europe, North America, Africa or the Middle East. But discussion in hindsight does bring a desire to structure a certain narrative. There is no specific documented evidence that the opera's ideas (or choruses!) actually sparked a revolution, but the seeds were certainly being sown by Verdi and his contemporaries, and not only in the streets and newspapers, but most definitely on the opera house stages as well. Certainly the power of music and the rebellious and defiant text of the "Va, pensiero" chorus suggests a poetic, if not historically accurate, association with Risorgimento, or Unification, movement that changed the political landscape in the decades throughout which Verdi was most prolific.

*Q. How do you see the political issues of Nabucco, such as nation-building and identity politics, still playing out in the world today?*

If human beings ever had any power to truly learn from our own mythology, history and literature – the *Iliad*, the Bible, Shakespeare, Verdi, Britten, etc. – I think we would have by now. The seemingly insatiable appetite for land, riches, sex, power and control knows no cultural or geographic boundaries. Vengeance and desire for retaliation against those who have wronged you are hallmarks of the reactions from both sides of the conflict in *Nabucco*; I fear Verdi and Solera were making candid observations of the world they saw around them and not offering a blueprint for a way forward.

*Q. You're also the set designer for this production – what can you tell us about the intricately painted set pieces?*

A formative part of my training as an opera director and designer was spent at the Accademia Teatro alla Scala in 2000 and 2001. The theater there – as both a building and a company of artists – has existed largely unchanged since 1776 and of course has produced hundreds of world premieres including many of Verdi's operas. Though taste and aesthetics both musically and visually have changed over the centuries, there is a certain level of craftsmanship that is always present onstage there.

In order to capture the essence of Verdi's world of the 1840s for this production, the scenery that I designed for this production needed to be painted in a very specific style. One of the scenic artists I chose studied for many years under the same person whom I had the honor of working with at La Scala, so already there was an aesthetic connection to our training and development. This 'master teacher' of course had studied with the chief scenic painter of the theater in the 1960s who had studied under his predecessor, and so on, etc. all the way back of course to Verdi's time. This artisanal chain of knowledge allows for a stylistic continuity to be passed down from generation to generation. My fear is that some of this artisanal talent will be lost if it is not given enough opportunities to be practiced and honed, so I'm really eager to present this very-much-alive art form to an audience who may have never seen anything like it before.

