
Getting to the Bottom of Brazil's Gerald Thomas

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Arnold Schoenberg's twelve-tone opera *Moses und Aron*, unjustly portrayed in the classical-music media as a "jumble of dissonant cacophony" and a "tough intellectual exercise," has forever stood on the fringes of the standard repertoire.

Its Viennese-born Jewish creator, a great-uncle to conductor John Neschling, was also credited with having supplied his own libretto, much as another musical marvel, the revolutionary Richard Wagner, had done for his works.

By 1932 the score had all but been crafted for the first two acts, when ill health and the rising tide of the Third Reich forced Schoenberg to flee the following year to America, where he took up successive teaching posts in Boston, Los Angeles, and briefly Chicago.

While the composer later revised the text to Act Three, the work was left unfinished at his death in 1951, despite his directive to perform the final act as a spoken appendage to the two completed ones - a practice not normally complied with in actual performance.

What remains, then, is an unparalleled opera-going experience where philosophy and theology converge in a head-on clash over ideas: the conflict of biblical prophet Moses and his views of a benevolent, all-powerful Supreme Being ("omnipresent, omnipotent and unimaginable"), and that of his brother Aron's slickly mundane version, a simplistic solution for mass consumption that the children of Israel could more easily grab on to.

Their dialectical debate ends in the Second Act, with Moses' heart-wrenching cry, 'O Wort, du Wort das mir fehlt!' (Oh Word, thou Word that I lack!), let out as an audible affirmation of his inability to give form and definition to what is, in essence, formless and indefinable.

Most visionary artists have felt this same need for understanding, with some of them taking their frustrations out to absurdly preposterous lengths.

A good case in point is Brazilian director Gerald Thomas, who staged a well-received 1998 production of Schoenberg's complex theater piece in Graz, Austria; and whose personal artistic credo (that "words are less important and more restrictive than images") has driven him to the outer limits as well of post-modern visual expression.

But his more recent version of *Tristan und Isolde*, given in August 2003 at the Teatro Municipal in Rio de Janeiro, almost rang down the curtain once and for all on his controversial stage career.

As a stunned assembly watched in amazement, the drama unfolded with a couple of novel "touches" unwisely added in, including a masturbating woman, a chorus of Hasidic Jews, a fashion show, and a riotous, cocaine-addicted appearance by none other than Sigmund Freud, the protagonists' de facto analyst.

The entire affair took place not in Wagner's mythical Cornish locale but in the good doctor's private consultation quarters.

This is exactly the sort of "event" most Europeans have grown accustomed to over the years, what with their constant exposure to such personality-driven régisseurs as Patrice Chéreau, Walter Felsenstein, Harry Kupfer, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, and Giorgio Strehler, to name but a few.

The same cannot be said, however, for tradition-bound Brazilians who, when it comes to their favorite operas, like them served with all the classical trimmings.

Greeted at the end with a salvo of boos and catcalls, Thomas turned his back to the audience, dropped his green-colored underpants, and flashed his bare buttocks at them. "You could have heard a mosquito fly past," he claimed afterwards.

For his maverick efforts the authorities slapped Thomas with a public indecency charge, "Surprising in a country that we love for its openness to all kinds of political and social dialogue," American composer Philip Glass was quoted as saying in his defense.

"The act itself was not obscene. What they are objecting to is an artist replying to his critics, and knowing Gerald's work, he would of course choose a theatrical response."

Thomas even refused a plea-bargain agreement, stating in effect: "If I pleaded guilty, what would that say to my fellow professionals and later generations of artists? Don't do anything risky? I don't accept the fact that I committed a crime because I decided to 'moon' the audience in my own theater.

"I joined the music of Wagner, an anti-Semite, with the ideas of Freud, a Jew that changed thought and the art of the twentieth-century. But I thought that I had created a pretty formal opera with a thoughtful concept. Fashion really does kill passion, especially in a piece like Tristan und Isolde."

It very nearly killed his chances at directing future theater projects, too. And if chutzpah were an accredited field of study, then Thomas would hold a doctoral degree in it.

Indeed, anyone familiar with the wacky world of the avant-garde, and the vast laundry list of his bizarre stage works, can attest to the claims made against him, labeling the audacious director as "profoundly ridiculous," "an incurable crackpot," and "a precocious boy who went senile at the age of thirty."

Others have hailed him as a "genius," a "pop star," and "the most lively and animated presence on the moribund stage of the Brazilian theater today."

It is fair to assume by these colorful, off-center comments that one can never be certain of anything that has ever emerged from this nonconformist's wildly vivid mindset.

"I have become a presence in Brazil's cultural life," he told The New York Times as far back as 1988. "People are already talking about the pre-Thomas and the post-Thomas eras of Brazilian theater."

His lack of modesty aside, Thomas epitomizes the commonly held notion that "to be an artist is to not recognize frontiers."

In that, he shares similar circumstances with another iconoclastic colleague, maestro John Neschling: both come from Jewish backgrounds, both were born in Rio de Janeiro - in Thomas' case, in 1954 - and both are equally at home in Europe, North America and their native Brazil, despite not always feeling welcome there.

Negative criticism has nonetheless played a part in Thomas' daily routine since the mid-seventies, when he first dedicated himself to the stage at London's famed National Theatre.

"I was the youngest director to enter and also the quickest to leave," he commented to the Brazilian magazine *Veja*.

"I debuted with Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which all the newspapers bad-mouthed. At the Theatre, no one dared look me in the face, so I took my piece off the marquee. Fortunately, an American producer told me I was in the wrong city. I then moved to New York and staged the same piece again. This time, it came off without a hitch."

Working in the Big Apple between 1979 and 1984, Thomas expanded his professional horizons at La Mama Experimental Theater in Greenwich Village, where he presented numerous Off-Off-Broadway works by Irish playwright Samuel Beckett, a past master of the absurd - and a close personal acquaintance, until his 1989 passing.

Anyone for Dry Opera?

Upon his return to Brazil in 1985, Thomas formed the Dry Opera Company in the Manhattan-theater equivalent of São Paulo. The group eventually relocated to Rio in November of 1999.

"Dry opera," as it came to be called, is an original Thomas creation, an innovative style of theater that incorporates, in the words of reporter Alan Riding, "a cinematographic use of lights and blackouts, pre-recorded music, almost choreographic acting, and a sort of anti-language he describes as 'verbal hemorrhage.'"

How have all these elements helped to further the audience's appreciation for, and understanding of, his vanguard ideas about art?

"Text is only one aspect of theater," Thomas explained. "The other aspects are the setting, the sound effects, the music, and the lights... As written language, they may not be understood, but visually they will be sensed. And anyway, when does 'understanding' come? When a piece ends? An hour later? A week later?"

This is true. Although Schoenberg's serial Moses was made to suffer by the difficulty he faced putting words to his personalized vision, Thomas has had no such qualms about the integrity of his own speech, or the skill he displays in using it.

"Puns are my real interest, visual, philosophical, musical puns that subvert meaning. It's good for any artist to machine-gun conditioned values."

A brilliant marketer and self-promoter, he is fluent in several languages, among them Portuguese, German, French, and Spanish, in addition to British-accented English.

He relishes, too, the wider latitude a strictly theatrical forum has allotted him throughout the span of his thirty-year career - but in art, as in life, there are limitations.

There are times when even Thomas has gone too far in the liberties he has taken with the sacrosanct work of others. For example, in 1987 he presented a trilogy of Franz Kafka pieces, one of which, a stage adaptation of the Czech writer's *The Trial*, made heavy use of music from Wagner's final opera *Parsifal* - a first for Thomas.

It was also an occasion for the inventive director to replace the original text with his own imposition of ideas. "I don't need Kafka's lines," said Thomas. "I just need his ambiance. I can make better use of him by putting other lines in the bucket he has created."

The year before he staged *Carmem Com Filtro*, which, like the Kafka Trilogy, played first in repertory, then traveled successfully abroad to New York, Vienna, Munich and Hamburg. Literally "Carmen With Filtertips," and based on the same Prosper Mérimée story that inspired Bizet's popular *opéra-comique*, Thomas' streamlined rendition boasted minimalist music by his friend and partner, Philip Glass.

The play became one of several joint collaborations, the most controversial of which turned up later in Rio, in 1989, where together they unveiled their *Mattogrosso*, a sprawling, three-part spectacular created exclusively for the Beaux-Arts brilliance of the Municipal. It was billed as the first true "environmental opera."

Expectations naturally ran high, but the writer-director was severely rebuked by critics, mostly for his "marvelous capacity to stage his deliriums, puns and piles of cultural references."

One journalist went so far as to describe the work as "a repugnant nightmare," while another felt that, "Visually, it was beautiful, but it seemed to be at the service of emptiness." And as for Glass' score, "It was irritating. It also had nothing to do with Thomas' play." The composer himself called Mattogrosso "a collage of images. My music gives it a musical window to look through."

Still, how can one dismiss a piece that mixes three pillars of European cultural history - William Shakespeare, Charles Darwin, and Richard Wagner - with American comic-book characters Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Batman?

As usual with the eloquent Mr. Thomas, his reaction to the chaos around him was maddeningly oblique: "I am trying to transform the sung aria, the didactic aria, into a scenic thing. I use enigma. You have to let the audience complete the puzzle." And so it goes.

Yet the basic question for Thomas remains: what would he accomplish with a so-called standard repertory assignment - the complete Ring cycle by Wagner, for instance, a project "made-to-order" for his especially fertile imagination? Would he get away with subverting the master's well-known text, or would mere visual subversion be sufficient?

Audiences have already experienced his radical reworking of *The Flying Dutchman* in Rio (1987) and Busoni's *Doktor Faust* for Graz (1995). How about trying something more stylistically challenging for a change, say, a new production of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, *Così fan tutte* or *The Marriage of Figaro* at Glyndebourne?

Similarly, Beethoven's lone opera *Fidelio* and Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* are waiting in the wings. Would he consider instead a lavish Baroque piece by Handel, or a less stately form of eighteenth-century entertainment?

At this point, even a Strauss operetta or two will do. And let us not forget the great Italian composers, Verdi, Puccini and Rossini - how would they fit into the overall stage picture?

It is high time the talented Thomas came in from the outer fringes of the avant-garde, and joined the modern ranks of the classical mainstream - without compromising his outré principles, that is. Surely, that would be his greatest coup. He could conceivably spice up operatic life, as we know it, given his far-fetched, Freudian account of *Tristan*.

What is still not known about him, as far as the theater world is concerned, is if and when he will run out of ideas before his own third act is complete.

Some say past performance is no indication of future events. Not so with the savvy Thomas: when all has been said and done, he is "barely" getting started.

(To be continued...)

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