

## *American Dreams*

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The action of Jürgen Flimm's new production of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* – which recently had its Berlin première at the Staatsoper after an initial run in 2014 at the Mikhailovsky Theatre in St Petersburg – begins where both the novel and the opera end: in an America of the imagination. In place of eighteenth-century French society, we are presented with the exotic glamour of silent-era Hollywood in which Manon is an elegant starlet, Des Grieux an earnest film extra, and Geronte a mogul who makes and breaks acting careers with a wave of his hand. Yet while the setting proved a natural fit for the story and the production remained focussed and likable throughout, it was the two strong voices at the heart of the opera – Anna Nechaeva's Manon and Riccardo Massi's superb Des Grieux – which left the most lasting impression.

Mr Flimm's directorial assurance was apparent throughout the evening. Even the busiest scenes – notably the casting call at the beginning of the first act which placed Manon's audition across the stage from Des Grieux's 'Tra voi, belle, brune e bionde' – had a decided clarity of purpose, and the principal characters were all, with the possible exception of Geronte, exceptionally well delineated. While Manon and Des Grieux were presented as a reasonably straightforward pair of doomed lovers, the treatment of Lescaut was perhaps the production's most inventive (and sinister) touch: Lescaut spent most of the opera following Manon with a hand-held film camera, going even so far as to follow her and Des Grieux into their exile, dragging a floor light to make sure that his sister's death would be properly lit. He acted as the production's chief victim of hyperreality and, in the opera's final moments, one was left with the sense that his desire for an unreachable world of images was, more than the passion of Des Grieux for Manon, responsible for driving and shaping the tragedy.

Because the action began in America, the staging presented the fall from grace of Manon and Des Grieux – envisaged in Abbé Prévost's novel as a deportation to the colonies of the new world – less as a geographic banishment than a callous destruction at the hands of an uncaring studio system, a permanent exile from the Hollywood of elaborately contrived

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**Berlin, domingo,  
4 de diciembre  
de 2016.** Schiller  
Theater. Puccini:  
Manon Lescaut.

Jürgen Flimm,  
director. George

Tsy-pin, sets. Ursula Kudrna, costumes.  
Anna Nechaeva (Manon Lescaut). Roman  
Trekkel (Lescaut). Riccardo Massi (Des  
Grieux). Franz Hawlata (Geronte). Stephan  
Rügamer (Edmondo). Dominic Barberi  
(Innkeeper). Natalia Skrycka (Dancer).  
Miloš Bulajić (Dance Master /  
Lampighter). Vincenzo Neri (Sergeant).  
David Oštrek (Captain). Staatskapelle  
Berlin. Mikhail Tatarnikov, conductor





Puccini: Manon Lescaut. Jürgen Flimm, director. Mikhail Tatarnikov, conductor.  
Berlin, Schiller Theater, december 2016 ©  
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dreams. Manon's punishment for betraying a studio head was precisely that well known show-business fate of 'never working in this town again'. The trajectory of the drama was established in the course of two intermezzi: the first, which separated the first and second acts, was accompanied by a montage of famous cinematic death scenes (and not just from silent films: *À bout de souffle* and *Bonnie and Clyde* were both represented). Between the third and fourth acts, the love-and-death glamour of these images were replaced, with newsreel footage from the great depression.

These cinematic quotations offered an effective frame, although they did not, thankfully, come at the expense of actual character development. Yet while the second act concluded with a dark moment of implied violence and the third act, with its naming and shaming of the various women whose studio careers were about to be crushed, had some remarkably affecting moments, there was very little about the production that seemed troubling. The slick sets of George Tsy-pin, which placed the action in a stylised world of warm yellows and cool blues, and the ever-delightful costumes of Ursula Kudrna, which stopped just short of irreverent, further contributed to the sense of even the production's most extravagant moments being held under tight control. If there was nothing which seemed out of place, there was also little that emerged as a genuine surprise.

This may not, under the circumstances, have been a bad thing. There were undoubtedly many in the audience who were there only for the singing, and they could not have been disappointed by the two central performances. Riccardo Massi's Des Grieux in particular was thrilling from beginning to end; his voice had an effortless strength of projection matched by an instinctive sense of the rhythm underpinning each melodic line. He established his credentials early on, with an arrestingly elegant, powerfully lyrical 'Donna non vidi mai', and moved from there to a series of scenes – alone and with Manon – each of a similarly high quality. The impassioned final moments of the third act, punctuated by a resounding 'Ah pietà' would have been as affecting even in a less dramatically-charged staging.

Anna Nechaeva's Manon seemed oddly deliberate in her first exchange with Des Grieux, but by the time of her excellent 'In quelle trini morbide' she had settled into a more natural mode of delivery. This was followed, moments later, by a confident 'L'ora, o Tirsi' in which the lightness of her phrasing did not preclude a fundamental firmness of tone. Indeed, her performance seemed to gather in intensity as the opera progressed, and her duets with Des Grieux, in the third and fourth acts especially, were full of the grand emotional assertions for which Puccini's operas are renowned.

The Geronte of Franz Hawlata was vocally secure, but often seemed to lack the bluster and haughty manner demanded of his character; the subtleties of his performance were perhaps



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lost in the world of artifice that surrounded him. Roman Trekel, however, was an effective Lescaut. If he did not quite have the projection to match the central lovers, his performance nonetheless conveyed a considered intelligence and was supported by excellent acting.

Conductor Mikhail Tatarnikov established a focused pace for the action, occasionally driving the orchestra into an excitable state – the scene between Lescaut and Manon and the love duet with Des Grieux, both in the second act, were undeniably elevated by the vigour of the playing – but generally avoiding the score’s not-inconsiderable potential for sentimentality.

Between the production – elegant and imaginative without being outlandish or conceptually taxing – the two central performances, and the solid support from the orchestra, there was very little about the Staatsoper’s new *Manon Lescaut* to which one might object. Yet while Mr Flimm did an exceptional job of finding the correct balance between artifice and substance, one occasionally wished he had allowed the darkness of his vision to play a somewhat more prominent role in the action [[See video](#)]. Beneath the polished surfaces of his production, there seemed to be an even greater tragedy – a sort of grand critique on the human cost of entertainment – waiting for its moment in the spotlight.