

# *Cancelling the Count*

JESSE SIMON

In the first decades of the current century, *The Marriage of Figaro* has been a regular fixture on the list of most-performed operas; and, as with any opera of comparable popularity, there is always the danger that new productions will simply coast on the charm of the music without bothering to make a strong case for the continued relevance of the story. While it is true that even a lacklustre *Figaro* can be delightful, the excellent new production from the Opéra de Paris offered something far greater, a staging that managed to be modern and topical without denying its audience the opera's fundamental pleasures. Between wonderful singing and playing, superb acting and a refreshingly high level of engagement with the possibilities of the text, the production was a welcome reminder of how, in the right hands, *Figaro* can still be a great theatrical experience.

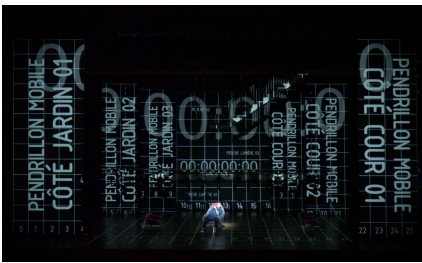
Director Netia Jones used the Palais Garnier itself as her starting point, setting the action in a series of backstage corridors, dressing rooms and rehearsal spaces based loosely on those of the opera house. The principal set of the first two acts, offering a view into a central room and two adjoining rooms on either side, was especially elegant, allowing Ms Jones to create a series of unrelated parallel scenes, which often provided a subtle commentary on the main action without distracting from it. Admittedly the idea of setting an opera within the meta-theatrical milieu of its own creation is far from novel, but the world of the theatre offered a remarkably close fit for the social hierarchies that dominate the libretto: if the singers are the royalty of an opera company, their work is made possible only through the tireless efforts of the costume-makers, répétiteurs, accountants and other support staff.

The opera house may seem an enchanted space to members of the audience, but for the singers, seamstresses and administrators who spend their days behind the scenes it is little more than a workplace; and in all workplaces, alas, lurks the threat of sexual harassment. In this case it was the Count – or rather the fictional singer playing the Count – who was the main offender: although married to the long-suffering prima donna, he had no qualms



Jones, *Le Nozze di Figaro* © 2022 by Vincent Pontet / OnP

**Paris, miércoles, 9 de febrero de 2022.** Palais Garnier. Mozart: *Le Nozze di Figaro*. Netia Jones, director. Peter Mattei (Almaviva), Maria Bengtsson (Countess), Ying Fang (Susanna), Luca Pisaroni (Figaro), Lea Desandre (Cherubino), Dorothea Röschmann (Marcellina), James Creswell (Bartolo), Michael Colvin (Basilio), Christophe Mortagne (Curzio), and Kseniia Proshina (Barbarina). Marc Labonnette (Antonio). Orchestra and Chorus of the Opéra national de Paris. Gustavo Dudamel, conductor



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trying his luck with the ballerinas of the company, or with Susanna, one of the principal costumers. Although the Count plays along with the anti-harassment campaign organised by Figaro and other members of the staff, his insistence in forcing himself on an unwilling Susanna sets the stage for a well-deserved downfall.

The updated setting and modern themes would, on their own, have been enough to make for a memorable staging; yet Ms Jones refused to let the opera rest solely on the strength of its concept and nearly every scene was elevated by its carefully observed and vividly rendered characters, who were both wholly faithful to Da Ponte's overall schema and completely plausible within their twenty-first century backstage setting. Although the acting was never laboured or contrived, every movement, gesture and expression was geared towards revealing the essence of each character's personality. Susanna's self-contained sighs and subtle eye-rolls told of a lifetime spent dealing patiently with idiots; and the Countess was all the more tragic for allowing only small flashes of disappointment to escape from her veneer of stoic professionalism. Even the minor characters were fully realised: Bartolo had all the swagger of an accountant, and the grandiose bluster of his 'La vendetta' was undercut by a hidebound stuffiness that suggested just how boring his revenge was going to be.

Yet the characters rarely ventured into caricature (with the possible exception of Cherubino, who occasionally seemed little more than a collection of sullen-teenager poses) and their actions unfolded with a crisp logic. With such strongly delineated figures on a collision course with one another, the staging never had to fall back on laboured physical comedy or unnecessary gimmickry – even the video projections in the early scenes of the first act were subtle and well-executed – and the extended finales of Acts Two and Four built to a peak of frenzy without the stage action growing unnecessarily chaotic. The staging also held the principal characters in a near-perfect balance, never allowing one to eclipse the others in importance: if the Count being held accountable for his actions provided a frame for the larger drama, the temptation of the Countess and the individual journeys of Susanna and Figaro towards enlightened disillusionment gave the evening its pleasing depth.

The cast was excellent throughout, with no weaknesses among the principals and strong performances in the supporting roles. Maria Bengtsson was a superb Countess: there was little else in the evening that could equal her transfixing 'Porgi amor', although the hushed second verse and dramatic coda of 'Dove sono' came close. In addition to her naturally expressive phrasing and luxurious breadth of tone in the lower-lying passages, Ms Bengtsson was also a compelling presence, able to alter the mood of a scene with a glance or gesture: her flustered reaction to Cherubino's song was strangely disarming, and her piercing rebuff to the Count's attempts to placate her during the second act finale conveyed



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the profound magnitude of her suffering. Ying Fang brought a similar depth of emotion and expression to Susanna. Although her ‘Deh vieni’, backed by an insistent, almost hypnotic pulse from the orchestra, was enchanting, she was at her best in the evening’s more dramatically charged scenes – the trio of the first act, her disguised encounter with Figaro in the fourth, and pretty much the entirety of the second – that allowed her to combine clarity of tone with line-readings of exceptional nuance and insight.



Mozart: *Le Nozze di Figaro*. Gustavo Dudamel, conductor. Netia Jones, director. Paris, Palais Garnier, February 2022. © 2022 by Vincent Pontet / OnP.

Both Luca Pisaroni and Peter Mattei – as Figaro and the Count – were equally strong, while giving the central male roles a high degree of contrast. Mr Pisaroni was weightier in tone, and so commanding a presence that he could convey the full import of ‘Se vuol ballare’ without even rising from his chair. His sense of being on top of the game – which gave such a spark to the conclusion of the second act and his brief but pointed encounter with the Count before the finale of the third – faltered only during his wonderful ‘Aprite un po’ which he approached with equal parts blind anger and genuine heartbreak. Mr Mattei was the more agile, finding an assured path through the Count’s various frustrations in the second act

finale and delivering a triumphant ‘Vedrò mentr’io sospiro’ that suggested a calculating meanness of spirit; yet his ‘Contessa perdono’ in the final scene was so beautifully wrought that, in a different production, he might even have convinced the Countess forgive his indiscretions.

Lea Desandre managed to capture the brattiness of Cherubino while also delivering a lovely ‘Voi che sapete’ and a ‘Non so più cosa son’ that started somewhat rushed but grew in stature as it slowed down towards its conclusion. James Creswell brought an appropriate sense of inflation to Bartolo’s ‘La vendetta’ and Dorothea Röschmann was a delightful Marcellina, sparring with Susanna and pleading her case to the Count with rapt conviction, but plausibly sympathetic in the second half. (It is always a shame when ‘Il capro’ is cut – as it nearly always is – but all the more so when it could have been performed by a singer of such distinction.)

Gustavo Dudamel delivered an excellent Figaro in Berlin several years ago and since then his feeling for the score appears only to have deepened. Although the performance was marked by his customary exuberance, there was considerable flexibility in his tempi, and one had the sense of a reading tailored to meet the strengths of the singers, not just from scene to scene but moment to moment; the key to Mr Dudamel’s interpretation lay in folding those innumerable micro-adjustments into a unified reading of considerable momentum and focus. Individual scenes were highly charged without feeling rushed, and in the wonderfully-paced finale of the second act Mr Dudamel built steadily toward an inspired climax without losing sight of the subtle shifts in mood that give each component scene its distinctive character.

While an excellent cast and strong musical direction would, on their own, have been enough to convey the essential qualities of *Figaro*, it was the attention to character – on the part of both the director and the singers – that elevated the production from a mere

entertainment to a more complex and ultimately more satisfying experience. There are, at the time of writing, only two more performances remaining in the current season, but one can hope that this intelligent and thoroughly engaging *Figaro* will return to the stage of the Palais Garnier before too long.

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