

Claus Guth and The Inverted Dioramas

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Abstract: This article focuses on the directorial aesthetics of Claus Guth, an artist that specialises in reinterpreting the lyric creations of the great opera houses worldwide. Disengaging or maybe understanding hidden meanings of the librettos and musical scores, speculating and reinventing the characters' stories, the German director gives birth to new realities which mold to the original ones, transfiguring them in unexpected ways. The *Messiah* oratory by Georg Friedrich Händel is a good example, because the incoherent libretto that serves as foundation to the baroque composition is enriched by Claus Guth through a salutary intervention, in which the director questions matters such as religiosity and the intimate beliefs of the contemporary man. Similarly, other works I debate upon in this article test the limits of perception of the audience, not necessarily because they are right or wrong interpretations, but rather because they tend to become possible points of view in understanding the characters, which are dislocated from their usual world and transported into another in which, with irony and humor, they are forced to reinvent themselves.

Keywords: dioramas, metareality, reinvention, juxtaposition

The art of the lyrical scene, prudish in traditional opera houses, has long been more than daring, is innovative and gives trends that have become “canonical” in the countries of Western or Northern Europe, even if its authors vehemently dislodge themselves from the normative idea of the trend, be it post-modern, or called in a certain way. For whether we accept it or not, contemporary art, taken at the whirlwind of forms, contained in the robust garment of consumption, ever more generous and thinner, no longer offers directions for a long time. In fact, it is almost no longer about consumption or consumption needs, it would almost not be necessary to consider the definition of trends, being valid in themselves and identified in isolation in courageous lands. It is easy to note that those who taste the forms of art, and here I will turn especially to that of the show, are very different in Europe; the German public will welcome with greater generosity an inconsistent, illogical, or overturned scene production than the Italian one. In 2022, there is no need to talk about the courage to give of some people of culture, but about the strength and openness to receive of the public, coming not from the habit or the snobbery of the refined appetite for abstract

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art, but from the curiosity of diversity, the failure to be faced with possible or impossible realities.

During the withdrawal period itself, during the lockdown, many exegetes of the stage art saw an opportunity to redefine, to balance the values, a way the plank will filter the quality product, willing to open its pores to new techniques and directions. As soon as things became more permissive, as soon as the theatres had the opportunity to open their doors again, the struggle to survive inevitably arose; managers and artists resorted to means at hand to resume their start. The problems suddenly became not substantive or even formal, they turned into challenges that would put into operation a suddenly broken mechanism. The regulations proposed by those able to order them were not aimed either in Romania or in Europe at the cultural sector, deprived and damned to resort to compromises. Finally, things have settled in part, the waters seem to calm down, at least temporarily some pessimists say, but surely the future will be guided by the means that turns into a defining substance – money. In Romania, the budget dedicated to culture is expected to be smaller and in the rest of the world the situation is not at all optimistic.

However, beyond this brief introduction, I intend to turn my attention to an important name of the opera production in Europe – Claus Guth, a name whose resonance bypasses Romania's borders, for reasons that are unknown to me. Since the '90 of the last century, after completing his studies in philosophy and directing, Guth has been focusing on the opera performance to which he tests its limits without any inhibition. Approaching several new titles in the scenery of the opera, *El Cimarrón* by Hans Werner Henze at the Atlanta Opera in 1995, *Cronaca del luogo* by Luciano Berio at the Salzburg Opera Festival in 1999 or *Celan* by Peter Ruzicka at Semperoper Dresden in 2001, Guth is the first director of these productions, giving himself the freedom to approach them without prejudice, anticipating his entry into the great lyrical repertoire. His homeland, libertine for a long time close to the repertoire works, was undoubtedly a school of taking risks, of shaking up the topics addressed, supported only at the level of pretext for the great masterpieces. The scene, the mirror of the present, speaks through contemporary means of what is happening today – Shakespeare's creed worn as a banner by the great creators of the show business.

We are familiar with the tendency of German directors to overturn and reinterpret the reality of a text or an opera libretto to talk about something else altogether. Post-dramatic techniques are also part of Claus Guth's working tool, as they seem to define the originality of his fellow countrymen. Dean Frederick

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Lundquist noticed in his work *The challenges of opera direction*¹ the fact that two great directions of playing a score become possible levers on which the entire structure of the future show is based: in the case of the former, the narrative is based on the opera libretto, therefore on the spoken text, on the logical dialog between the characters and, in the latter, the narrative is based on sounds, on the music that awakens a unique interpretation in each one. Of course, there is also the possibility of conjugating the two directions according to the intrinsic logic of the work, built almost every time, the melodicity is built on a complementary dialog. It often happens that the logical reality of a text is far from the socio-cultural context of contemporaneity, which is regarded as a failure of the original work. When narrative does not meet the current needs, music provides a saving key to the one charged with translating it into a concrete space. Perhaps this explains why, by post dramatic means, a story can be embodied by relying on a much different one.

It is a truism to say that great works can be reiterated in the present of the one who recreates them, regardless of the historical periods of origin. Even so, the question frequently arises whether they are more valuable when, by their construction, they direct to the era in which they were conceived, which implies a faithful re-enactment, or whether, by their reinterpretation, the essence is emphasized more strongly. From this point on, opinions diverge in various interpretations; but my proposal comes to follow the development of a metanarration based on a work that becomes a pretext for the new one. Thus, some artists of the present choose to give other meanings to a work that, in a Cartesian reading, directs the audience's interpretations toward an easily perceptible horizon (in this context I do not mean at all a superficial reading or limiting interpretations). In our approach we will analyse a small part of the lyrical theatre productions signed by Claus Guth - inverted dioramas. To clarify the option of my title and proposal, I intend to regard musical works as museum dioramas which, put in the light of great creators, are radically transformed. What kind of reality are they talking about? - It's a question that resonates perpetually every time the focus goes to Claus Guth. However, it is necessary to clarify, the distorted meta realities or dioramas are not mentioned here as generality, but they often appear in the portfolio of the director already mentioned.

Following the works directed by Claus Guth, we find quite frequently a predilection for oratorios which, although concert works with a mainly sacred theme and intended to be represented in an appropriate topos – cathedrals or places of worship – to be brought back into the public eye, they sometimes infiltrate the opera theatres. It is well known that in the 17th century, when oratorios became known, during the lent, they replaced the representations of the opera, forbidden by the

¹ Dean Frederick Lundquist, *The Challenges of Opera Direction*, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2000.

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Catholic Church. Sacred topics, inspired by biblical facts or the religious conduct of ancient characters, become a challenge for today's creators who intend to stage them. Claus Guth gathers in his personal portfolio five staged oratorios of great significance.² I will refer here to one of these, made at the Theatre an der Wien / Opera in Vienna in 2009, the director being seconded by the scenographer Christian Schmidt, choreographer Ramses SIGL and choreographer Konrad Kuhn. Although in 1743, at the premiere of the *Messiah* oratorio, Handel expressed his desire to be represented on the stage at Covent Garden and not in a cathedral, which had caused the church's riots, religious works are still a rarity on the opera stage today. It often happens that this practice is regarded with scepticism and interpreted as an act of laicizing a composition with another destination. In any case, today, sacred music, tasted by the niche audiences, clergy and a part of the elite of the music lovers, is hardly tolerated by the general public. If the *Messiah* oratorio is offered to the audience in the form of classical concert, in which the soloists and the choir sing their score without sketching a minimum movement, the three hours of Baroque music become fastidious. If other oratorios seem to have a logical sequence of the parts and themes addressed, if in the lyrics sung by the interpreters one can see a fragile narrative, even dramatic figures, characters, sometimes, in the case of the *Messiah* oratory there can be no such thing. In fact, the intention of the librettist Charles Jennens was to glorify Jesus' clemency and to sing songs of praise to him, not to dramatize his life. The mission of a director to stage such a composition becomes, therefore, almost impossible.

Claus Guth proposes a courageous approach, trying to bring together the sacred music and the profane story of some people from today, concerned, like all of us, with the shortcomings of the immediate, dysfunctional family relationships, professional encroaches that cast individuals into an agonizing today, in which despair overshadows every trace of hope. The characters are easily recognizable, they talk about the people from the present, being in a story where the cry of divinity becomes the only possibility of salvation. Although Claus Guth has been accused by some critics of creating an agnostic show, I believe that the narrative proposal points to the deeply religious conscience of each. To drill into the intimate faith of the contemporary man with such finesse, makes the meeting of sacred music of oratorio

² *The St Matthew Passion* by Heinrich Schuetz (1666) – oratorio achieved in 1992 – Church of Christ in partnership with the Academy of Fine Arts, Munich;

Messiah by Georg Friedrich Händel (1741) – oratorio made in 2009 – Opera in Vienna;

Lazar by Franz Schubert (1820) - oratorio made in 2013 – Opera in Vienna;

Iefta by Georg Friedrich Händel (1751) – oratorio made in 2016 – The National Opera in Amsterdam;

Saul by Georg Friedrich Händel (1738) – oratorio made in 2018 – Opera in Vienna.

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to tuck gently the seemingly unhealing wounds of the laity. In addition, through the iconoclastic construction, frequent references to biblical facts – birth, betrayal, death, resurrection, but also through the inverted dioramas in which one can observe the image of the Saviour Messiah, the performance brings to the concrete plan a pasty of divinity.

In apparent disagreement with the text sung by the soloists and choir, the story invented by Claus Guth and by the playwright Konrad Kuhn is centred on a dysfunctional trinity, at the heart of which we distinguish the identities of three brothers and their families. The oratorio is opened by a symphony that invites the audience into the microcosm in which all things follow an inconstant temporality, the past connects with the present, flashbacks bring clarification on the present. The deaf-mute actress Nadia Kichler is of expressiveness and sensitivity, playing Archangel Gabriel's role, who summarizes the subsequent actions through sign language. The overture is therefore dedicated to the proclamation, it is a preamble to the whole action. Although not knowing the sign code, the audience is enchanted by the choreography and body movements of this character, which also appears in other contexts of the performance, in moments of sensitivity or confusion. In the first part of the oratorio, we are witnessing the funeral of a businessman, about whom we will learn later that he committed suicide because of a financial collapse. The bereaved, the brothers of the deceased, his wife, nephew, and brother-in-law occupy their seats, while the main actors sing the worship of Jesus.

The fragment of contemporary society recomposed in the box of the scene reminds of many of the tear pieces of people today. For example, the pastor who is about to give a speech is also tormented by the problems of the worldliness, seems to be possessed by an overwhelming mystery, tries to hide the guilt of the deceased to have ended his days, a truth that part of the “trinity”—the drug addict brother—reveals by opening the coffin lid and making known the cause of death—wrist cutting. When the scene becomes too bizarre to be carried out, Claus Guth, using the rotating scene, resorts to a flash-back that brings insight into this family's destiny. In the harmonies of the Ode *A child is born to us*, we participate in the baptism of the son of the “Messiah” (the businessman), a ceremony that will end unnaturally. This man's life is a wreck, the marriage fails, the company breaks down. Like Jesus, in a partial comparison, before making the fateful decision, the man, interpreted by the dancer Paul Lorenger, recalls the falls of Christ on his way to Golgotha. At the same time, his wife and brother respond to erotic desires in a body language that expresses both passion and pain. Although anachronistic, biblical events are often suggested in the directorial construction of Claus Guth. The scene of anointing the feet of Jesus is recalled in the adulterous bed—the wife of the “Messiah” touches with veneration the

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feet of the lover, ready to leave the bedroom of the hotel room: „How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace.”

Although many of the scenes would be worth mentioning here, I will dwell on the one who sends to the *Last Supper*, being also in this context, a moment of revealing the truth, of bringing the mysteries to light. At the table that concludes the funeral ritual of the deceased – his spirit is brought back into the scene, seated in the center of the table, but unseen by the others – the drug addict brother, in the presence of the family members, unites the hands of the wife of the Messiah and his brother, bringing to the fore the betrayal and its consequences. As in a delirium soaked in wine and water, recalling the blood of the Messiah shed on the cross, the traitorous brother recognizes the guilt he confesses as a burden that must have happened, with victory as its end, therefore salvation.

The stage paintings of Claus Guth become iconoclastic also by the presence of the choir, extremely well placed on the page, completing the atmosphere and context proposed by the creators of the performance. Functioning as a collective entity, the chorus describes homogeneous, painstakingly movements set on the page by the choreographer Ramses Sigl, in a good vocal form, which pays not only for Handel’s score, but also for the role he plays in the context As Chanda VanderHart observed in the online magazine “BachTrack”: “The Arnold Schoenberg Choir, in stellar form, not only overcame the unusual challenge of singing an oratorio without scores but also mastered some very involved choreography. Their movements drew heavily from sign language movement without exactly being signing... again muddying the boundaries between text and movement.”³ (trad.n.)

Blasphemous, or perhaps only extremely courageous, the oratorio proposed by Claus Guth is part of contemporary tendencies to overthrow predictable structures through unexpected associations. Certainly, the story invented by the director and by the playwright easily fits into contemporary issues, and the condition of collective unfulfillment and the apparent damnation of the individual taken by surprise by social macro mechanisms are not alien to modern man. Joining them with an oratorio that inclines toward meditation, toward religiosity, becomes disturbing. We know well that biblical facts always have, beyond the sacramental side, a reference to the earthly existence of the individual, in a continuous connection with the post earthly one. And here, enrolling in a metamodern aesthetic, the *Messiah* oratory of Claus Guth proposes

³ “The Arnold Schoenberg Choir, in stellar form, not only overcame the unusual challenge of singing an oratorio without scores but also mastered some very involved choreography. Their movements drew heavily from sign language movement without exactly being signing... again muddying the boundaries between text and movement.” Chanda VanderHart, *Blurring lines between speech, dance, and musical forms; a staged Messiah at Theater an der Wien* - <https://bachtrack.com/review-messiah-guth-wien-apr-2014>

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a sincere and ironical vision of being that transcends the boundaries of the concrete world, makes imperceptible the barriers between life and death, between sacred and profane. Becoming inspirational, the course of some individuals today, close by theme and similarity of events to the pillar of the Christian faith, takes on multiple meanings, leads the audience toward an update of their own religiosity, personal and authentic relation to divinity.

In the same course of the inverted dioramas there is also the production of *La Bohème* by Giacomo Puccini, performed at the Paris Opera, Bastille Opera, in 2017. The popularity of the musical composition and the frequency with which it appears on the major profile scenes make it a title well-known to the public, accustomed to meeting with staged performances in which the playwright of the libretto and the staging function in tandem. Claus Guth, as we have already mentioned, often aims to shake the structures of the original work altogether. This time, by grasping at a fragile idea he had also proved when performing *Rigoletto* by Giuseppe Verdi, of course by engaging other mechanisms and moving other ideas, the director carries out the stage action having as premise the hallucinations of the main characters and the totality of the creations resulting from this process.

The director imagines a parallel story, a possible situation in which the four astronauts - Rodolfo, Marcello, Schaunard and Colline - in a drifting spaceship, doomed to an inevitable end due to lack of oxygen, recall episodes concluded for a long time in the delirium of the last life impulses. Claus Guth confessed in an interview with the French press⁴ that the stellar musical passages and the astral dimension of the orchestration led to such an interpretation; so, the directorial proposal is one of emotional origin, starting from the way in which the score is received by the audience, and not the libretto. The directorial stakes become legitimate in this context, but are they in line with the realistic course of the story? At the premiere of the performance, the director's exit to limelight was met with boos and blame, although the French public is accustomed to the directorial challenges. Even the specialized critics did not receive the performance differently from the ordinary audience. However, some aspects of this proposal deserve to be detailed.

Claus Guth starts the performance of *La Bohème* with the interrogation - what if? - which gives him great freedom to approach the scenes and situations proposed by the authors of the composition. The delirium caused by the failed mission in space transports the heroes of the story into a hallucinating reality in which memories interfere with an unclear present. Moreover, reaching another planet, some characters equipped in cosmonauts will meet their earthly projections which, in another time, in another fluency of movements, in natural dynamics of the body carry

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2fGP-jWOpw&t=619s&ab_channel=OperaOnline

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forward the story of the work. Interferences of plans, spaces and timelines often create confusion, although once accepted, the directorial proposal may be plausible. The landscapes described by Etienne Pluss's brilliant scenography are apparently detached from the movies *Solaris* by Tarkovsky or from *2001 – a spatial odyssey* of Kubrick, as Shirley Apthorp also noted in the Article in "Financial Times" dedicated to the premiere of *La Bohème* performed by Guth.

The lunar diorama from *La Bohème* is a painting of refined aesthetic flair; it tries to reproduce an inaccessible landscape, transports the characters into a dimension where only fragments of their emotions still converge on the earthly reality. In fact, this is the inner proposition of the creators, namely, the purging of deeply human feelings and their passing through a filter that gives them transparency. What is left of Lucia's death, called Mimi by her close friends? What's the use of the struggles of these characters, when beyond the known world they all turn into figures that step on steam? Of course, a veristic interpretation of this proposal is not appropriate, but the directorial super-theme urges a different look at the performance.

Claus Guth assumed the role of *enfant terrible* from the very beginning and continues to follow his principles, giving himself the freedom to play with the classics constantly. Another proof is *the Barber of Seville* by Gioachino Rossini, performed at the Basel Theatre in Switzerland in 2005. The production imagines Beaumarchais' action in a world of the animals in which the characters, through the typologies they represent, become insects approaching human beings. Thus, the lazy maid is represented by a snail, the beautiful Rosina is a larva that turns into a butterfly during the cavatine, etc. Defined by the playful mood, the performance cannot be classified as a maculation of the original opera and libretto precisely because of the assumption of the game by its creators. Built in synchrony with the dramaturgical truth, however, it appears to be an insectarium in which every outside eye looks smiling, finding similarities between rationality and instinct. This time, the diorama proposed by Claus Guth, though inverted, is not troublesome to the Puritans either.

We often wonder what the purpose of these directorial proposals is, what is the intimate motivation of some creators to offer original and sometimes muted approaches. Some of us, as Liviu Ciulei once did, can say that originality denotes, in fact, a lack of information, others will argue that eternal and classicized stories will always have the strength and the ability to reach the public precisely through their universality. In any case, even blamed or considered hallucinations of stage directors or contemporary playwrights, such proposals, called in this Article inverted dioramas, reveal the need for today's creators to offer the public new opportunities for evasion. The relocation of events to different spaces leads the authors to bring their masterpieces closer, to make them their own and the public's, to make them the demiurges of other worlds that sometimes do not follow predetermined rules, and

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leaving the matrix does not entail catastrophic consequences, does not harm anything other than the roughness of some contemporaries, crusty in their own convictions.

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