

## Defending interpretation (but *not* Peter Sellars)

by Michael J. Minnicino

The Public Broadcasting Service has just concluded its broadcast of director Peter Sellars's interpretation of the three operas in which Mozart collaborated with librettist Lorenzo da Ponte—*The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*.

This new Mozart series is typically outrageous Sellars. *Figaro* is set in Trump Towers, with Count Almaviva as a sex-crazed tycoon, Cherubino as a punkster, and Figaro as a homicidal maniac barely under control. Don Giovanni is a cocaine-sniffing pimp in New York's South Bronx ghetto; Sellars casts a pair of black, identical twins as the Don and his servant Leporello. The action of *Così* takes place somewhere on Long Island in "Despina's Diner," run by a whorish Despina and a Don Alfonso who is a Vietnam vet going through post-combat stress syndrome; the chorus "Viva gloria militar" is sung by demonstrators supporting Operation Desert Storm; the opera ends with all the participants collapsing in sexual frenzy and suicidal depression.

All three operas are sung in Italian, but with a modern American slang translation twisted to fit the new-devised circumstances. Everyone goes into violent rages at the slightest provocation, and almost every character seems fixated with sexually groping other characters; a lot of food is thrown at walls, and blouses are unbuttoned at regular intervals. Each act is introduced on-camera by Sellars himself (no relation to the late British actor), whom one commentator, referring to the director's spikey hairstyle, has accurately described as a "talking pineapple." Sellars makes trenchant comments like, "Is [*Così*] the most offensive anti-feminist opera ever written, or an exploration of the outer, weird edge

of the human psyche?"

As usually happens after Sellars perpetrates a new production, critics and columnists scramble to say something profound. My favorite comment for this round comes from the prestigious *Los Angeles Times* music critic, Martin Bernheimer, who tells us that "the drama is reinterpreted in terms vital to the aesthetic sensibilities of contemporary America." The question arises: If one performs *The Marriage of Figaro* at an institution for the criminally insane, does that justify a reinterpretation vital to the aesthetic sensibilities of Jack the Ripper? But, the comment is revealing; it tells us something about our "kinder, gentler America."

It is tempting to join the few critics who simply dismiss Sellars as a lone iconoclast who is disfiguring Mozart and Shakespeare in an attempt to make them "relevant" to modern audiences. This, however, is insufficient on three counts: First, it is sterile conservatism which tells us nothing about how great drama and opera *should* be interpreted; second, it ignores the fact that Sellars is being sponsored by the highest levels of the "cultural mafia" as America's premier avant-garde interpreter; and, third, it mistakes what Sellars is doing—he is not trying to make things "relevant," his goal is much more dangerous than that.

The 33-year-old Sellars has been well connected from the beginning of his career. With a baccalaureate from Harvard, he was handed the directorship of the Boston Shakespeare Company at the tender age of 25; the next year, he was given international exposure as director of the American National Theatre at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington; thereupon followed a round of important

commissions, including his award-winning opera *Nixon in China*, with serial-minimalist composer John Adams (also broadcast by PBS). Currently, Sellars can hardly keep up with the demand for his efforts. He is now filming "The Cabinet of Dr. Ramirez," a remake of Robert Weine's 1919 film, "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari," which inaugurated the decadent Expressionist phase of Weimar Germany; the film score is by Adams, and the financing is from the Munich independent producer Rainer Mockert, who also funded Sellars's Mozart project. At the same time, Sellars is preparing a new production of Mozart's *Magic Flute*, set in 1990s Los Angeles, to premiere at the famous Glyndebourne Festival in Britain. In September, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Adams and Sellars will unveil their newest opera, *Klinghoffer*, based on the disabled retiree who was murdered by terrorists in the *Achille Lauro* cruise ship hijacking.

### Unnatural selection

As it stands now, most of the choicest directorial and compositional assignments and prizes are being automatically given to a select few contenders. In the United States, if it doesn't go to the Sellars-Adams team, it usually ends up with Philip Glass, the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer whose most recent coup was the Metropolitan Opera commission for a work to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of the New World. Like Adams, Glass is (usually) a serial-minimalist; this means that he admits that a musical idea can be generated in the twelve-tone system, but it will take 30 or 40 measures to develop a thought that Mozart sketches in three or four measures. The effect is hypnotic, and purposely so. (For readers who have never been exposed to this material, they might, for clinical purposes, listen to the serial-minimalist score to Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*, available for videotape rental. Predictably, Glass himself has done the score for a big new staging of *Henry IV, Part I* which opened in New York City Feb. 28.)

In Britain, the most important work often goes to another darling of PBS, Jonathan Miller, a physician who started in the business of the Cambridge University absurdist-comedy group "Beyond the Fringe." One of Miller's recent contributions broadcast on PBS was an English-language *Rigoletto* set in the criminal underworld of the New Jersey docks in the 1950s, with the jester portrayed as a bartender and stooge to a mafia don. Miller is now also Britain's most sought-after director. And, if it doesn't go to Miller, there is always Peter Brook, the spiritual godfather of all of the above. As director of the National Theatre in the 1960s, Brook declared war on "rationalist" Shakespeare with a famous, hallucinogenic *Midsummer Night's Dream*, then went on to let the inmates literally take over the asylum with *Marat/Sade*.

Admittedly, there are competent directors still left in the Western world, but hegemony (and a lot of the money) is now so firmly in the hands of these men and their disciples, that even the classicists must bend to their influence. Thus,

the problem is not so much these directors as individuals, but the fact that "postmodernism"—the aesthetic theory to which they all subscribe to varying degrees—has been purposely sponsored to a dominant position in the arts.

### Postmodernism is 'politically correct'

Postmodernism is very politically correct these days, and I doubt you could go beyond an entry-level course in drama, art, or literature on any American campus without being deluged by it. But, like most politically correct ideas, it has its proximate origins in one of several psychological warfare projects sponsored by the Communist International back in the 1920s and 1930s. Many commentators mistakenly portray Sellars and Miller, for instance, as trying to rescue Shakespeare or Mozart from obscurity, by "modernizing" them and making them palatable to the jaded tastes of modern audiences; the effort is commendable, they argue, even if the outcome is at times extreme. However, Sellars and Miller would not agree. Sellars does not think that he is adding mate-swapping and unbridled lust to *Così*; he thinks, and has stated, that mate-swapping and unbridled lust were Mozart and Da Ponte's actual subject, consciously or unconsciously, but could not be displayed openly due to the mores of late-18th-century Austria. In the jargon of postmodernism, Sellars is merely "liberating the erotic subtext" which was in the opera anyway.

This postmodernist nonsense is the coalescence of two trains of thought after World War I. The older tradition is from Friedrich Nietzsche, who in his *The Birth of Tragedy in the Spirit of Music*, revamped Aristotle's old theories of poetics to claim that dramatic forms as we know them are really an outgrowth of the frenzied communal rites of Bacchus and Dionysus in primordial Greece. In the 20th century, Nietzsche's theory was gussied up with the appropriate psychoanalytic decoration and reissued as the "Theater of Cruelty" concept by the French surrealist poet Antonin Artaud. In the 1920s, he asserted that the function of theater must be to reach into the audience and forcibly drag out its collective repressed terrors, thus liberating the audience to communal truth. As might be guessed, Artaud spent his entire adult life in and out of mental institutions and electro-shock therapy. When Peter Brook made his Damascus Road conversion to postmodernism in the 1960s, he signaled it with a seminar on Artaud's theory.

### The origins of the Frankfurt School

In Germany, at the same time as Artaud, Nietzsche's claim was also being revived, but with a bit more sophistication, and with Marx rather than Freud as decoration. In the 1920s, the Communist International sponsored a think tank in Germany called the Institute for Social Relations, more commonly known as the Frankfurt School, after its location. Its purpose, according to its founder, Hungarian communist Georg Lukacs, was in essence to determine and then destroy those aspects of Judeo-Christian culture which were pre-

venting the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia from spreading to the West. Music, literature, and drama were particular points of investigation, and were the responsibility of sociologists Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kra-cauer, and Herbert Marcuse, with the collateral help of playwright Berthold Brecht, a close friend of Benjamin, but too much of an anarchist to join the institute.

The problem, they found, was that all great pieces of Western art invariably worked to ennoble the audience and to convince it of the value of human progress, spiritual and otherwise. However, you can only have a Marxist revolution if people are embittered, dissatisfied with the course of things, and suspecting that "God is dead" to this world. Art, therefore, must work to alienate; it must be ugly, in order to expose the ugliness of the world. Thus, the atonal music of Schoenberg and Berg (with both of whom Adorno, a pianist of some note, studied) is an advance from Mozart and Beethoven because its cacophony most accurately reflects the spiritual turmoil of class struggle in the modern period. Similarly, Benjamin and Brecht worked out the concept under which the latter wrote his plays: *Verfremdungseffekt*—the estrangement effect—the stage must dislocate the audience from previously-held notions of God, country, and society, and leave them enraged and isolated, a kind of mini-revolution in every performance.

There still remained the problem of already-created art. To this, the Frankfurt School applied the theory of hermeneutics (another popular and very politically correct course of study in today's American and West European campuses). According to hermeneutic theory, all art exists in translation, even if it is in your own language; the "language" one uses in literature, the plastic arts or music can be reduced to nouns, but even a noun is merely a symbol, emanating an "aura," which is itself completely determined by the social relations in which the artist is entrapped. To perform an old work of art, it must be translated into the symbology of the more alienated modern era. For instance, Beethoven (this is one of Adorno's doozies) was trying to develop atonalism in the harmonic progressions of his later works, but could not do so freely; modern interpretation should take that into account. Marcuse in his *Eros and Civilization* can thus claim that Friedrich Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* are really about creativity as the liberation of repressed eroticism.

You begin to see why Peter Sellars could call his sexually frenzied *Così*, "Mozart's autobiographical opera." This also suggests why Sellars would attempt to revive a film genre from the despairing depths of Weimar Germany. Sellars and company do not *reflect* the horrors of our time, they are consciously attempting to make our time more horrible in order to fulfill a very nasty political agenda.

### Time to say, 'Enough!'

How do these monsters get away with it? Admittedly, they have the financial support, and most critics are as much

postmodernists as they, but ultimately, the blame lies with the silence of the audience. It is time to say "enough" to this postmodernist nonsense, and end the careers of these political iconoclasts. However, this does not mean that we must turn Mozart and Shakespeare into icons. Demanding "accuracy," for instance, is insufficient. Seeing *Julius Caesar* acted in doublet and hose under stylized togas, or Portia played by a 13-year-old boy, would be more loyal to Elizabethan performance canon, but would surely undermine the play's power today; without an adequate concept, using Beethoven's metronome markings or period instruments advances little. The genius of the great artists of the past is the living truth which they tell to all cultures in all times; we must demand interpreters who let Mozart and Da Ponte breathe today, not who genteelly smother them in academicism, nor violently strangle them with political misinterpretation.

The subject of all great drama and opera, all great literature, is love. That may sound oversimplified, but, take a moment to review. Consider all the operas of Mozart, Beethoven, and Verdi, all of Shakespeare, Schiller, Cervantes, Dante, Molière, and Aeschylus. The subject is invariably love—of a beloved, of country, of God—or the pathologies of love—greed, pride, ambition, sexual gratification. Great art turns upon *agapē*, a word the Greeks used to differentiate selfless, spiritual love in the living image of the Creator's love, from *eros*, that is, mere desire for a real or imagined object. The most common translation for *agapē* into English is from the King James Bible: "charity." The Frankfurt School psychological warriors understood this well enough to banish the word *agapē* from their voluminous writings, and to emphasize only *eros* as the motive principle in art. Those old enough will recognize this emphasis on the liberation of eroticism from the constraints of "oppressive capitalist society" as the core ideology of the drug-rock-sex counterculture of the 1960s; most of the "gurus" of the counterculture were Frankfurt School alumni.

### Agapē and freedom of interpretation

The replacement of *agapē* by *eros* kills art. Without *agapē*, there is no "hook," if you will, upon which the great artist can hang his or her irony. What is funny to Mozart, or what is sad to Shakespeare, becomes incomprehensible and bland to the eroticized audience; the reading or listening becomes emotionally unmoored. *Agapē* is the ordering principle of proper interpretation; the director's only purpose can be to draw out that emotion, no matter how deeply buried it is in the soul of the audience. Within that constraint, there is infinite artistic freedom. Without it, even the best interpreters find themselves importing sensual effects and erotic overtones simply in order to make the piece interesting to the audience. I am reminded of an otherwise standard Metropolitan Opera production of *Rigoletto* which introduced simulated intercourse in the upstage shadows of the opening party scene.

Nude *Hamlets* and rap-rock *Fidelios* will not help repro-

duce another generation of young people who love opera and the stage; they will do exactly the opposite. In 1924, a pro-Bolshevik stage director named Leopold Jessner tried to perform an Expressionist interpretation of Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* in Berlin. It never got past the first act; the audience shouted it down every time. This kind of "audience participation" has a long and venerable tradition in Europe and the United States. If we are to end the postmodernist robbery of our artistic heritage, perhaps it should be revived.

## Branagh's 'Henry V': a second opinion

by Carol White

*A recent commentary on a Shakespeare film in EIR stimulated much discussion, pro and con, among readers and editors. We print here one of several contributions received, in the interest of encouraging debate on such crucial questions of popular culture.*

Having seen Kenneth Branagh's film production of *Henry V*, with great pleasure, I was considerably challenged by Renée Sigerson's review: "The Movie 'Henry V,' or, Why the British Elites Despise Shakespeare" (*EIR*, March 1, 1991.)

### Language and great civilizations

A living language which is capable of conveying great thoughts is dependent upon poets for its development. The earliest great language known to us is Sanskrit; and it has been demonstrated by Indian scholars, such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, that the Vedic scriptures contain myths which were actually astronomical poems based upon a solar calendar. These he dates to around 10,000 B.C. Such interconnectiveness between poetry and science is lawful. Indeed, before written language was common, poetry was the essential means of ensuring the transmission of knowledge for thousands of years. A similar case can be made for the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. While they are ascribed to Homer, they may have had a longer oral history.

We are living in a dark age; poetry and true music are not only not composed, but the treasures of the past are being forgotten. Now we are even losing the capacity for literate speech. Our language is dominated by the present tense, verbs are replaced by nouns, we have ceased to use modes

of speech such as the subjunctive (as in—"would this were not the case"), and so on. The subtle use of language as a vehicle of conceptual thought is rare indeed. From the street child to the President, most Americans appear to be unable to compose even a simple sentence, far less a coherent dialogue capable of expressing complex concepts.

### The film

Transforming a play to film involves some license with the original script—that, of course, is one of the reasons why in general the original version of a novel or play is superior to a film adaptation. Furthermore, the way in which a movie is constructed as a pastiche of scenes which are put together in the cutting room, transforms the demands upon an actor to something less than the coherent development of a given character. In a sense, the film director encroaches upon the freedom normally allowed on the stage. In this case, as director and lead actor, Branagh has the maximum opportunity to determine how the character is shaped, within the limitations of the medium.

In this day and age, however, how many Americans a) have access to and b) can afford to attend a staged theater performance? Films (and video tapes) are the media accessible to the most people.

Having said all of this, I did thoroughly enjoy the production. I think the reason is that, despite certain simplifications of plot and so on, Branagh preserves Shakespeare's language. Living in a country—the United States—in which most thoughts are barely articulated beyond a grunt or a mumble, hearing Shakespearean English is equivalent to attending a performance of classical music.

A nation which has lost the capability to speak English, will obviously have great difficulty in comprehending the dialogue of a Shakespearean play when it is performed; and certainly many Americans no longer have the linguistic ability to read Shakespeare or the King James version of the Bible, with anything approaching ease. I imagine that some of the plot devices used by Branagh to speed the action are intended to carry the audience along, and I can excuse this, because I am convinced that after seeing the film, many in the audience—like me—will be drawn to reading the original.

I would be happy to see the film shown in classrooms (certainly it would be a welcome change from such satanic pornography as the movie *Excalibur*, which is shown in many schools, purportedly to introduce students to a medieval world view).

In her review, Renée Sigerson implies that major changes in dialogue were made by Branagh—she implies for evil purposes. Such an inference is a gross exaggeration, as a careful comparison between the text and the film will show. The summary of the development of the action of the play, in the review, is precisely the development as it appears in the film. The key soliloquies and other major speeches remain as