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SELF-PARODICAL CONSEQUENCES OF OPERATIC PARODY*

Abstract: With rare exceptions, the critical response to the opera *The Perfect American*, whose protagonist is Walt Disney, was lukewarm. For the most part, the critics blamed its modest result on Rudy Wurlitzer's libretto, described as incoherent, dramatically limited and lame, even boring. The input of the composer Philip Glass, the most distinguished name in the artistic team that created *The Perfect American*, received higher marks, but even those who praised some of his compositional solutions (and especially his trade skills) unanimously concluded that the music nevertheless had not reached a high enough level to compensate for the deficiencies in the libretto. In the interpretations available so far, the opera was generally understood to be a (failed) attempt at depicting Disney as an insufficiently talented person with an idea, who built his empire by shamelessly appropriating the merits of those who, thanks to their talents, were able to carry out his idea. The author in this text wants to show that the opera can be perceived in quite a different way: as an allegory of contemporary American culture, torn between its cosmopolitanism and humanistic openness, on the one hand, and provincialism and parochial rigidity, on the other; this duality is encapsulated in Disney's character *per se*, hiding behind a porous façade of *perfection*. The text reads that Glass's music did not succeed in supporting this dimension of Wurlitzer's libretto, thus inadvertently adding a self-parodical layer to its parodical content. Since the composer failed to come to grips with the dramatic challenges he was facing, the music constantly circled in a hiatus between bold avant-garde pretensions and hackneyed forms of minimalist mannerism.

Key words: Glass, Disney, America, opera, minimalism.

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The world premiere of Philip Glass's opera *The Perfect American* took place on 22nd January 2013 in the Teatro Real in Madrid, one of two opera houses that commissioned and co-produced the work. From 1st to 28th June it was presented to the British audience, on the stage of the other commissioning party, the English National Opera in London.¹ The libretto, written by Rudy Wurlitzer, was adapted from the novel by Peter Stephan Jungk. To the audience's satisfaction, all the visual elements of the production (set design, costumes, choreography, animation, lighting) were entrusted to the members of the *Improbable* theatre company, led by the director Phelim McDermott.² One of the London performances was an inspiration for writing this text.

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In 2001, Peter Stephan Jungk, American writer, translator and theatrical director, wrote a provocative *biographie romancée*³ in the German language, titled *Der König von Amerika* (published in 2004 in English as *The Perfect American*), dealing with the last months in the life of a giant of the 20th-century American film industry – Walt Disney (1901–1966). The novel can be understood as a kind of attempt by the author to unmask the creator of a fascinating world in which, in his time, he also was absorbed naively and emotionally, like most of the children born in America (and elsewhere).⁴ The novel's structure is episodic, and indisputable biographic facts (which the writer carefully collected)⁵ are combined with a whirl of fictional characters (among them the narrator, Wilhelm Dantine),⁶ situations and Disney's thoughts, memories, fears, dreams and

¹ The Australian premiere of the work has been announced and scheduled for 2014.

² The ENO ensemble was conducted by Gareth Jones, and the leading roles were sung by Christopher Purves (Walt Disney), David Soar (Roy Disney), Janis Kelly (Hazel George), Donald Kaasch (William Dantine), Pamela Helen Stephen (Lillian Disney), Zachary James (Abraham Lincoln).

³ This genre determinant was given to the novel by the author personally: Peter Stephan Jungk, "Some thoughts concerning my novel, *The Perfect American*", *The Perfect American, English National Opera 2012/13 season*, ENO, London, 2013, 15.

⁴ Jungk spent the first five years of his childhood in Santa Monica, California, where he was born in 1952.

⁵ By his own admission, the writer has read every biography of Walt Disney he could acquire, and the best in his opinion are *The Disney Version* by Richard Schickel and *Walt Disney – A Biography* by Bob Thomas. Jungk, "Some thoughts concerning my novel, *The Perfect American*", 13.

⁶ The novel is in fact the story of Dantine, an animator, who loves and hates Disney at the same time. At first, he is cruelly exploited by Disney, and then even more cruelly fired for taking part in establishing a trade union of animators and promoting leftist ideas. Torn by contradicting emotions towards his former employer, Dantine carries out a research in order

experiences, so that the boundary between the true and the fictional is blurred to the utmost. The author needed the imaginary character of Dantine the animator so as to creatively combine, through him (and his attitude towards Disney), two contrasting images of Walt Disney: the idealized one based on unconditional worship, which he had heard about in his childhood years from a family friend who was also a Disney's associate, and the realistic and impartial one, built by the biographers of this filmmaker. Jungk personally, it seems, was closer to a critical interpretation of Disney's character. The result of his demythologization of Walt Disney was the literary portrait of a deeply conservative (one could even say reactionary) personality who, in spite of world fame, remained trapped in the hopelessly narrow-minded views of the American backwater. (Nothing made Disney so nostalgic as the memory of the days at a farm in the little town of Marceline, Missouri, where he had lived for four years altogether.) In that reference, Jungk in his novel paraphrased Disney's catch phrase, which he used often in public appearances: "My whole life, I've been hiding behind a mouse and a duck."⁷ However, the very fact that he had gained fame, elevating him far above the farming world of idyllic Marceline, convinced Disney that he had become some sort of artist-prophet (so typical of Western Europe during the Romanticism). Thus, at the very beginning of the novel, the author makes the reader aware of the protagonist's egotism, best exemplified by a kind of prayer/mantra he utters at dawn every day: "I am a leader, a pioneer, I am one of the great men of our time, the words seem to echo within Walt. [...] More people in the world know my name than that of Jesus Christ. Billions have seen at least one of my films. It's something that never existed before me; an art form, an idea, a concept, that managed to address and move and delight the whole of mankind. I have created a universe. My fame will outlast the centuries."⁸

First and foremost, Jungk's novel parodies the image of the famous animator, who stole the hearts of children (but also adults) in America and all over the world, who spoke the language of innocent children's emotions, and who gradually became a true symbol of American normality and the American dream. Behind the smiling face with the signature moustache and kind eyes, Jungk uncovered the traits of an egomaniac, misogynist, even a racist, whose value system was a bizarre composite of Joseph Raymond 'Joe' McCarthy, a Midwest

to expose Disney for an untalented but ambitious man, but also to immerse deeply into his world.

⁷ Peter Stephan Jungk, *The Perfect American*, trans. Michael Hofmann, Other Press (re-printed edition), New York, 2012, 30 and 140.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

farmer and a merciless capitalist.⁹ In the months leading to the death of Jungk's Disney, covered by the novel, his already disturbed grasp on reality becomes almost caricature-like, since the thought of imminent death only intensifies his delusions of grandeur.

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Guided by such a literary basis, Rudy Wurlitzer wrote the libretto for the eponymous opera. He compressed Jungk's text (leaving out some colourful characters and appreciably weakening an important plotline involving the narrator, Dantine), and devised a libretto of 11 scenes (organized into two acts), framed by the prologue and the epilogue. The episodic structure, typical of the novel, is even more pronounced in the libretto (particularly in the first act) and results in a sort of collage composition. Such an impression is mostly reinforced by the narration which, unlike the novel, is non-linear and built so that events from the present time (December 1966) are shifted to the recent past (September and October of the same year) and vice versa, several times over. Wurlitzer placed his prologue in the space of St. Joseph's Hospital in Burbank, California, with the expositional introduction of Disney as a patient. The dreary hospital atmosphere, burdened by the looming shadow of death and the role of a sick man corrode Disney's façade of a strong, domineering personality and intensify his inner turmoil, shown in the prologue as apparitions of nightmarish flashbacks, conjuring up the memory of his days in idealized Marceline. By adding a prologue, Wurlitzer further strengthened the discontinuity of the plot, but he did create a link with the first scene of the first act (which really takes place in Marceline) and with the very end of the work (Disney's death in the same hospital). The first act of the opera is more dynamic than the second, because it gradually reveals a complex microsocial network of people who were close and subordinate to Disney (the elder brother, Roy; the nurse, Hazel George; the wife, Lillian; the daughters), but it also introduces the characters who attack his ego (Dantine; the little girl, Lucy; the puppet of Abraham Lincoln) and are consequently, rudely driven away.¹⁰

The unquestionable pinnacle of the entire work is the fifth scene, the last one in the first act. It proceeds from the section of the novel that the director

⁹ A critic for the magazine *A Publication of the Metropolitan Opera Guild Opera News*, on the occasion of the Madrid premiere, wrote that Jungk in his book created a character of a monster.

¹⁰ In the second act, idolatrous Andy Warhol and the sick boy, Josh, who is a true admirer of Disney's work, appear as a counterbalance to aggressive Dantine (and to little Lucy from the first act).

McDermott, in an interview, qualified as the most operatic one, the seed from which the entire opera has grown.¹¹ In that scene, Disney is vainly trying to fix an audio-animatronic puppet of Abraham Lincoln, which he has constructed personally and which no longer functions in the way he had programmed it. He is having an interesting and bizarre ‘conversation’ with the malfunctioning artificial Lincoln, who (only adding to the bizarre effect) he addresses as “Mister President”. This dialogue completely exposes and reveals his being torn apart. Lincoln is his idol,¹² the one historic personality – the one *certified* “*perfect American*” – who is, on the one hand, Disney’s gauge for the criteria of climbing the social ladder, fame and power of global influence, but from whom, on the other hand, he strives to disassociate as thoroughly as possible, since that personality upholds the values of equality, tolerance and democracy – the foundations of ‘another America’ which Disney does not want to have anything to do with. Disney is at a loss for what attitude to take towards the historical Lincoln, who attracts and repels him at the same time, and he does not know how to repair the artificial Lincoln confronting him; so, the talking and moving puppet, at the end of the scene, attacks him and calls him names. The clash with ‘Lincoln’, at the end of the first act, is more devastating than death, at the end of the second act. For Disney, halfway through the opera, in fact clashes with the American reality (and his own claims to being ‘the perfect American’). This reality crushes him relentlessly, precisely because of the delusions he had about it (and about himself). The ‘delirious’ artificial Abraham Lincoln, which smoulders and eventually burns out, delivers the worst blow on Disney and thus reveals the true parodical edge of the work. In fact, the opera is not dominated by the tragic moment of the protagonist facing death that has been looming since the prologue. (At any rate, Disney knows perfectly well that death cannot destroy a myth, and at the same time, he is hoping to be frozen, and reanimated in the future, when the cure for cancer is discovered.) The tragedy lies in the principal character’s confrontation with the perversion of his own work. In McDermott’s staging of the end of the first act in *The Perfect American*, Disney’s entire imaginary world is incarnated in the bizarre ‘character’ of Lincoln, who is striking his maker almost like the ‘eternal villain’ Big Bad Pete would, in order to make him abandon his deeply wrong intentions and beliefs. The counterpart of this scene in the first act is the sixth scene in the second act: after Disney’s death, his formerly employed draughtsmen (led by Dantine) turn into animals

¹¹ Cf. “Making it work. Adrian Mourby meets director McDermott”, in: *The Perfect American, The Perfect American. English National Opera 2012/13 season*, ENO, London, 2013, 20.

¹² In the novel, Disney talks of Lincoln as his idol. Jungk, *The Perfect American*, 29.

that, bearing only remote and very disturbing resemblance to the beautiful animated characters of Disney's world, indulge in a threatening dance to instigate their 'righteous rebellion' against the exploiter.

What Wurlitzer made available to Glass was a libretto with great amount of prose text needing to be put to music, with insufficiently profiled, yet established (and even conflicting) relations between the characters, as well as an admittedly weak, dramatic plotline emerging from fragments within a sequence of loosely connected theatrical vignettes. Due to other commissions (his latest opera, *The Lost*, composed on Peter Handke's play *Spuren der Verirrten*, was premiered last April in Linz, Austria), Glass was late with his compositional responsibilities on this project (for example, the staging in Madrid was completed even before anyone had heard a single note of Glass's music, while the singers and orchestra members were well into rehearsing the first act when they received the music for the second act).¹³ Thus, it is no wonder that the music, completed under pressure for time, became the weakest link in the whole operatic project. Glass's music remained neutral, unimpressive and did not add any substantial component to the work. While the declamatory and monotonous vocal parts, throughout most of the opera, unfolded in complete indifference to the context, the inconspicuous, melodically and rhythmically uninventive (though not colourless) orchestral accompaniment functioned predominantly as a background, as occasional music in a theatre play. The result could not be any different because Glass approached the writing of the music for this opera as if it were just another of his 'portrait operas', devoid of all drama and adjusted to the logic of a hallucinatory stream of abstract images. In such type of true collage opera, an example of which was the infamous *Kepler* (2009), the fundamental emptiness of the musical expression could be perfectly covered by the innovative technical props, dance numbers or stage effects. *The Perfect American* became a sort of a trap, since it could not be reduced to another of Glass's 'portrait operas' for which the music is written routinely, by stringing up inert minimalist musical phrases that correspond best to a fragmented structure and almost two-dimensional non-dramatic plot. Since the dramatic potential of the literary basis did not disappear completely from Wurlitzer's libretto, it was necessary to compose truly *operatic music*, as required by the demands of its genre. After almost four decades of dissolving the boundaries between opera, musical theatre and theatre, it is apparent that Glass was not up to the task of composing music for an opera. Not only did the very successful innovative technical props,

¹³ The fact that creation of *The Perfect American* was unusual (dramatization – staging – music) was discussed by McDermott in the abovementioned interview. "Making it work. Adrian Mourby meets director McDermott", 20.

dance numbers and stage effects that abounded in *The Perfect American*, fail to cover the mannerism of the composed music – they merely emphasized it.

This was most apparent precisely in the key scene of the work – the last scene in the first act. When Disney engages in a bizarre monologue/dialogue with Abraham Lincoln's puppet, thus lending a highly parodical character to the opera, the music keeps on circling at an unreduced distance, as if it were the conclusion of the film *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), where Glass employed the incantations of the Hopi medicine men as an explanation for the explosion of the rocket and the fall of its last piece to the ground. The music in *The Perfect American* does not undergo transformations dictated by the libretto and, *having no tangible reason for it*, it becomes the means of its own self-parody. The audience who carefully listened to Glass in the fifth scene in the first act could see him on the stage too, struggling with his own *opera music*. Disney's incapacity to tame the rampant artificial Abraham Lincoln, who kept striking Disney *for having made him so freakish*, corresponded to Philip Glass's powerlessness to overcome the minimalist mannerism that has been destroying the rules of the opera genre for far too long for it to be able to accept those rules when that was expected of it.

Translated by Goran Kapetanović