

CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY THE NEW SEASON

'We don't just want people to sit back in their seats'

ROBERT HARRIS

The purpose of a theatre," the Canadian Opera Company's Alexander Neef tells me, "is to be full."

He's quoting Giuseppe Verdi, the master of keeping theatres full. And over the past few years, with ticket sales at 91 per cent of capacity, the COC has done an admirable job of fulfilling theatre's purpose, Verdi-style.

But for Neef, now in his fifth season as general director of the COC, there's another goal that transcends that basic need to keep patrons in their seats at the Four Seasons Centre during the 70-odd evenings and afternoons this season: the opera is in town. It's the need to engage his audience, to create a relationship with his community.

"Indifference is the enemy. We're not just there to provide a pleasant evening of entertainment, but an experience to which people can react, to which they can bring their own judgment. We don't just want people to sit back in their seats." And over Neef's tenure so far, he's accomplished that goal, with controversial productions of operatic classics, such as his 2010 *Aida*, to ground-breaking (for Toronto) forays into the world of contemporary opera (last season's *Nixon in China* and *Love from Afar*), to generally novel treatments of the staples of the operatic repertoire.

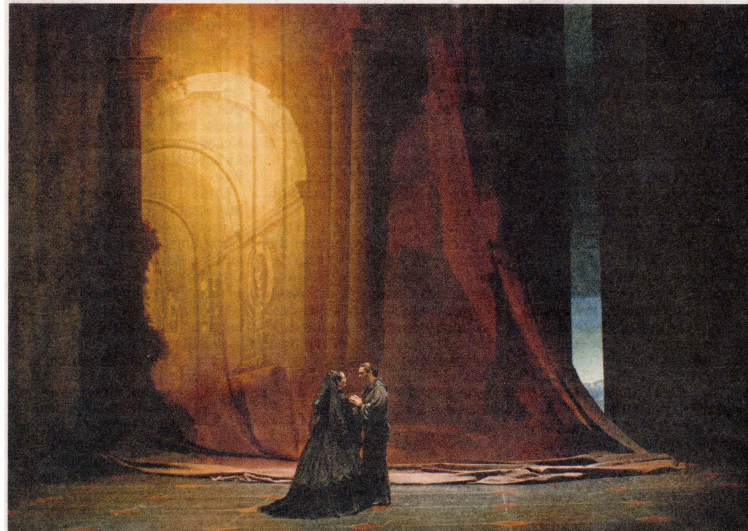
Some of the same ingredients of Neef's past seasons are in play for this one. There are two 20th-century pieces – Richard Strauss's *Salome* and Francis Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites* – three, if you count Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, which, although premiered in 1865, is still a piece of modern art, when all is said and done. There are the staples of the 19th-century

Italian repertoire: Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, which opens the season Saturday night, and Donizetti's *Lucia de Lammermoor*. We have a taste of the 18th century with Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito*, his last opera, written more or less at the same time as *The Magic Flute*. And in the spirit of keeping the theatre full, the light-hearted masterpiece of that other Strauss, Johann Jr. – *Die Fledermaus*. Something for everyone, basically. And done very much on purpose, according to Neef. "To me, a season is made up not of operas, but of Opera – it's important to give our patrons the full range of the art."

It's not possible to talk about this year's COC season without noting the Canadian singers appearing in major roles: Russell Braun, Michael Schade (twice), Richard Margison, Isabel Bayrakdarian, Judith Forst, Adrienne Pieczonka – and, for the first time in 17 years – 17 years! – Ben Heppner, singing *Tristan*. A friend, the most devoted opera buff I know, tells me that his heart swells with pride as he walks along the outside walls of the Four Seasons Centre these days and sees the Canadian singers featured so prominently there. We hadn't ignored these singers in the past, but it took a German-born opera manager, it seems, to remind us in spades of the great talent we've been developing for the world in our own country.

We'll find out starting Saturday night how that sense of engagement Alexander Neef cherishes so much continues to develop this season. Asked how he thinks Toronto audiences view his tenure, he says, "I think they know I can provide them great singers." He takes a considered breath. "And they know I like to push them a little bit."

Special to The Globe and Mail



Il Trovatore recycles the ugliest of 'Gypsy' stereotypes, making it a challenging opera to mount in the current political climate. CHRISTIAN DRESSE

Is *Il Trovatore* too hot to handle against backdrop of Roma persecution?

ROBERT EVERETT-GREEN

Every fan of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* has to find a way to deal with the scene where the peasant girl Zerlina shows her meek devotion to her fiancé by urging him to beat her. Those were the mores of the time, say most of us, feeling lucky to live in a more enlightened age.

That moral calculus doesn't work so well with *Il Trovatore*, which recycles the ugliest of "Gypsy" stereotypes. The Canadian Opera Company is reviving Verdi's blazing melodrama at a time when tolerance for Roma people is taking a beating here and abroad.

The plot turns on an opening narration about a Gypsy fortune teller, found near a noble infant's cradle and presumed to have put a wasting hex on him. The witch is tracked down and burnt to death. Her "accursed daughter" Azucena steals the boy, intending to torch him on the same pyre, but brings him up instead as her own son. The dead woman's witchiness is proved by her return as various spooky animals, one of which scares a man to death.

Every period in modern history, including our own, has given Roma people a starring role in fantasies of paranoid xenophobia. Verdi hit all the high points: sorcery, child-theft, deceit, hag-like appearance and an inherently damned condition.

Why does this matter now? Because violent anti-Roma incidents in Eastern Europe have escalated with the rise of far-right groups. Because Roma settlements in France and Italy are being bulldozed, with no provision for alternative shelter. Because in June our federal government moved to limit Roma refugee claims with legislation that could deem all 27 EU countries to be "safe." That would be news to Roma living in western Hungary, where Amnesty International reported that in August, 1,000 supporters of the far-right

party Jobbik paraded through one town, smashed windows of Roma homes and heard speeches urging action against "parasite gypsies." Jobbik won 17 per cent of the vote and 12 seats in Hungarian parliamentary elections in 2010.

Earlier this month, Sun News columnist Ezra Levant aired a screed in which he said that Canada's growing Roma population would "rob us blind as they have done in Europe for centuries." He was probably thinking of social benefits, not babies, but his rhetoric suggested that some Canadians still nurse the old gypsy stereotypes.

Fans of *Il Trovatore* tend to focus on its abundant melody, dramatic energy and famously difficult singing roles. The politics of the piece are presumed dead, or nullified by Azucena's maternal feeling for her stolen son. But current events have caught up with the opera in a way that Verdi, who knew the political power of the stage, would have understood.

So how should we handle his story of the Gypsy witch? If you set aside the spooky animals part, and listen against the grain, you hear the tale of an outsider killed simply because she was on the scene when a little boy fell ill. In 1905, when *Il Trovatore* was on the operatic hit parade from Paris to New York, six Roma men were arrested in a town outside Philadelphia, because they happened to be staying near the place where a missing boy was found murdered. According to the New York Times, "hundreds of men and women gathered along the streets. As the prisoners were brought in, there were cries of 'Lynch them!' 'Hang them!' " Verdi never set that chorus to music, but for me, the scene is a vivid and valid part of the backstory of *Il Trovatore*.

The Canadian Opera Company's production of Il Trovatore opens at Toronto's Four Seasons Centre on Saturday