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SATURDAY, APRIL 6, 2013 TORONTO STAR | E3

» ENTERTAINMENT



THE BIG INTERVIEW ATOM EGOYAN

Richard Ouzounian's Saturday feature on the most intriguing names in entertainment

Bringing light to our darkness

Anyone is capable of anything; the why is what captivates director

If you wanted someone to show you the dance of the seven veils or offer you a severed head on a silver platter, there isn't a better choice than Atom Egoyan.

The award-winning film and stage director has spent his career stripping away the shrouds of secrecy that people hide behind and presenting their bleeding psyches to us in all their ravaged splendour.

No wonder the Canadian Opera Company first turned to him to mount a controversially triumphant production of *Salome* in 1996, and has brought him back to reimagine it in the production that opens at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts on April 21.

"It was the late, beloved Richard Bradshaw who had seen my film *Exotica* and thought I would be a great mix with *Salome*," says Egoyan over a late morning coffee at Bar Italia, "and it was Alexander (Neef) who graciously invited me back to take another look at it 17 years later."

Normally, an opera revival involves bringing the creative team together with new vocal artists to duplicate their original production, but this particular show has its own unique challenges.

"In the mid-'90s, when we first did it, all of our technology — the 16-millimetre film, the glass slide projections — were fundamentally analogue," Egoyan explains. "Today, a lot of these elements have been digitized."

And some new features have been added.

"A few years ago, I went to a Feist concert at the Sony Centre and was blown away by the incredible shadow play of Clea Minaker and I knew her work could add a whole new level of visual artistry to the work."

Egoyan's desire to present the finest technical package possible isn't because he feels there are any weaknesses in the work itself. Far from it.

"To me, it's one of the greatest operas ever: an incredible marriage of an amazing libretto by Oscar Wilde and a revolutionary piece of music by Richard Strauss."

Its the story of how Salome, stepdaughter of Herod, becomes so obsessed with John the Baptist and his failure to acknowledge her passion for him, that she entices her stepfather with the dance of the seven veils and then claims John's head on a silver platter as her reward.

"At the time Wilde wrote the original play, it was considered one of the most shocking things ever, but nowadays it may seem tame to many people," Egoyan says.

The 52-year-old recalls how much



AARON HARRIS FOR THE TORONTO STAR
Director Atom Egoyan returns to the Canadian Opera Company to update his production of *Salome*, which opens at the Four Seasons Centre April 21.

things have changed in his own lifetime.

"I remember as a kid in Victoria being raised in a world where the naughtiest thing possible was a store in Chinatown that sold a nudist magazine wrapped in plastic that you could maybe see if you climbed up and reached for it on the back shelf. Nowadays you can see every possible kind of porn on the Internet. Everything Things you never even imagined. And you can find it at a very young age."

While not denying the technical advances we're privy to, Egoyan laments a certain loss of innocence.

"Technology has the ability to give us access to memories and experiences that we might have buried or never discovered. It both enhances and trivializes every moment of our lives."

"There are certain processes that we're designed to cope with through our memories that technology challenges because it makes everything present."

These thoughts are foremost in Egoyan's mind not just because of *Salome*, but because of his next film to hit the screens this fall, *Devil's Knot*.

Starring Reese Witherspoon and Colin Firth, it tells the story of the West Memphis Three, three men convicted of torturing and murdering a trio of 8-year-old boys back in 1993.

"My challenge is to place the viewer inside the minds of the leading characters, whether it's *Salome* or *Devil's Knot*, and not pass judgment."

ATOM EGOYAN

"The bodies of three young boys were found naked and bound in a swamp."

"It's a horrible act, to be sure, but once it has been revealed, it ceases to shock us," says Egoyan. "Acts cannot do that to us anymore. Now we look for the motivation. We want to find out what would have made a person do so dark a deed."

"It was a challenging film to make on many levels. The case is now the stuff of mythology; there have been numerous documentaries made about it. So to me, it became about the examination of motives and the seeking of justice."

Egoyan reaches back in time to tie the two projects together.

"That's what's fascinating about *Salome*. She grew up in an atmosphere of abuse and exploitation. Her demand for John the Baptist's head is not the ultimate revenge of a femme fatale. It's rooted instead in something that has been instilled in her quite systematically over the years she's spent in the Herod household."

"We're still learning about the horrors that a legacy of abuse can produce. The heritage of the residential

inhabit, but I can understand it."

With so many fascinating projects on his plate (he also just finished shooting *Queen of the Night*, about the kidnapping of a child, starring Ryan Reynolds, Scott Speedman and Rosario Dawson), it's fascinating to hear him talk about "the one that got away."

"I wanted to make a new movie version of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel*. I was going to set it in the American South in 1956, when the original film was released. We would be in a movie theatre showing the picture."

"Billy Bigelow would be white, sitting downstairs. Julie would be black, sitting in the balcony. But they would project themselves into the movie and wind up making it their own story."

"I had spoken to Hugh Jackman about playing the lead and he was very excited, but I couldn't get the idea past the Rodgers and Hammerstein estate. Maybe another time."

Meanwhile, he'll set *Salome* and her seven veils whirling on the stage of the Four Seasons Centre, making it look as wonderful as he can, because, "There has to be some element of seduction about our process. It's not enough to say, 'There is pain.'"

"We have to find a way of making people understand what causes the pain."

Egoyan smiles at the thought that he has been pursuing this journey all of his life.

"I was drawn to drama at a very young age back in Victoria when we put on Edward Albee's *The Sandbox*. I got excited by it and I said to myself, 'This is a world that I don't