

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

THURSDAY, APRIL 18, 2013



SECTION E

# Performing Arts

EDITOR: GABE GONDA



OPERA

## SALOME: TAKE THREE

His first two stagings were dogged by controversy, but after Atom Egoyan, signed on to recreate the Strauss opera for the third time, inspiration for a new approach struck in an unexpected place: at a Feist concert

J. KELLY NESTRUCK

As Atom Egoyan prepares to direct *Salome* at the Canadian Opera Company for the third time, he acknowledges having had second thoughts about his famously controversial staging of the title character's Dance of the Seven Veils.

After battling away the concerns of prominent female cultural critics when the production premiered in 1996 and was remounted in 2002 — one wrote she left “feeling violated as both a woman and a Jew” — the stage and film director now seems in agreement with some of what they said about his addition of a blunt depiction of sexual assault in shadow to the opera.

“I understand. It was a real assault,” Egoyan says. “I just don’t know if it needed to be as violent as it was in the original production.”

It took Egoyan a trip to a Feist concert in 2008, however, to figure out how to fix *Salome* while staying true to his vision. It was there that the director saw the shadow puppetry of Clea Minaker, who toured with the singer for a year and a half, and a light bulb went off in his head.

But before that moment of enlightenment, it’s worth revisiting the shadowy controversy that dogged (or perhaps enlivened?) Egoyan’s 1996 and 2002 productions in Toronto.

Richard Strauss’s opera — based on an 1891 play by Oscar Wilde — has been a constant source of outrage and debate since its 1905 premiere. How could it not? The biblically inspired story culminates in the teenage Salome performing an erotic striptease for her stepfather, Herod, in exchange for a bloody reward: the head of John the Baptist.

*Salome*, Page 7

Director Atom Egoyan at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto with puppeteer Clea Minaker, whose re-creation of the famous Dance of the Seven Veils blunts its brutality, if not its impact.

PETER POWER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

**FROM PAGE 1**

## Salome: What would justify this 'horrific' behaviour?

» Set in an authoritarian and voyeuristic world filled with cameras and designed by Derek McLane, Egoyan's production did not cause controversy for the usual reasons, such as the sensuality of Salome's dance or the gruesomeness of her necrophilic kiss with John the Baptist's severed head, however. Instead, it had to do with the director's attempt to, as he explains in a program note, "find some justification for Salome's horrific behaviour."

Devised in the period when he directed *Exotica* and *The Sweet Hereafter*, two films that grappled with the fallout of incest and sexual abuse, the answer that came to Egoyan was that Salome had also been the victim of abuse in her stepfather's court.

This was revealed to the COC audience during her Dance of the Seven Veils, which culminated in a shadow sequence choreographed by Serge Bennathan where she was sexually assaulted by Herod's henchmen (known as the "Five Jews" in the opera).

"The dance is this ritualized moment of abuse that is either occurring at that moment or that she's referencing," Egoyan explains now. "We're stripping away the exoticism of the opera, the idea of the fans and the feather."

Instead of being seen as a subversion of the male gaze of that moment, however, Egoyan's addition to the narrative came under fire from two female critics.

In 1996, Carole Corbeil (who has since died) argued in the *Toronto Star* that the director had teased the audience with Strauss's seductive score, turning them "without warning, into voyeurs of a gang-rape" – a choice she found morally "inert."

During the 2002 remount, the controversy went international after National Post critic Tamara Bernstein wrote that the sequence left her feeling doubly violated – and that Egoyan had robbed Salome "of the only power she has in the opera."

At the time, Egoyan vigorously responded to Bernstein's "inflammatory" review – writing that her "comments border on the libellous, and I expect an apology." He's calmed down now.

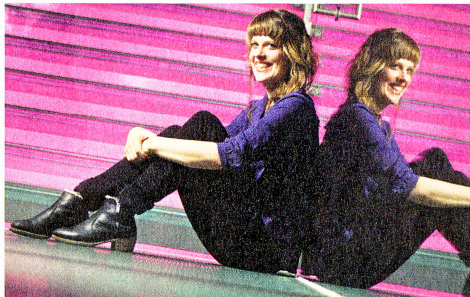
"That discussion was very ... pitched," the director says, taking a long pause as he searches for the right word. "I think it might have allowed me to stand back a little bit."

Moving the production from the Sony Centre to the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts permitted Egoyan to revisit "a number of elements that I haven't been happy with" – and invite Minaker, a Montreal-based artist who was named puppeteer Ronnie Burkett's protégé and awarded \$25,000 when he won the Siminovitch Prize, to rework the Dance of the Seven Veils.

Interestingly, though Minaker seems unaware of the concerns raised in 2002 – when the 34-year-old B.C. native was producing quirky puppet shows as a women's studies major at McGill University – her changes seem to respond to them.

For one, the dance is more beautiful and sensual at the start, restoring to the character some of the power of which Bernstein claimed she'd been robbed. "The sensuality is not just something that others exploit – it also belongs to her," Minaker explains.

In addition, Minaker uses mobile light sources to turn the dancers into shadow puppets, zooming in or panning and scanning – a more visually

**CLEA MINAKER: PUPPETRY OUT OF THE SHADOWS**


Atom Egoyan recalls going to see Feist at Toronto's Sony Centre a few years ago – but being entirely transfixed by the artist working behind the star singer. "There was this young woman working with these overhead projectors – it was just amazing, all the images being presented live," the film director recalls. "The interaction between her and Feist was just magical."

That shadow puppeteer was Clea Minaker, a Montreal-based performer-designer who, after graduating from McGill University a decade ago, went on to study at France's prestigious École nationale supérieure des arts de la marionnette. How prestigious? Only 15 students from around the world are admitted to the tuition-free puppetry school every three years.

Minaker, now 34, has carved out a career in the quirky field of contemporary puppetry that is truly interdisciplinary, working not just in theatre, but in music videos, at live concerts and now – thanks to Egoyan hiring her to rejig his

production of *Salome* – in opera.

Touring with Feist for a year and a half was a highlight, but being selected as puppeteer Ronnie Burkett's protégé when he won the (now sadly defunct) Siminovitch Prize in 2009 was a real turning point. The accompanying \$25,000 has allowed her to pursue her own muse rather than be just a gun for hire.

"I'd been wanting to create my own work for a long time and when Ronnie gave me the prize, I realized that I had to do it," she says. The result: *The Book of Thel*, based on the 1789 William Blake poem of the same name, will premiere next fall at Théâtre la Chapelle in Montreal – where Minaker has a home that she finds a convenient base between North America and Europe. "I really identify with the way that they do theatre in French," says Minaker, originally from Vancouver Island. "I think in French when I work artistically now."

J. Kelly Nestruck

poetic and less illustrative approach to the incident. "This time, the dance is composed for the image, it's not a dance with a light on it," Minaker says. "We're in her mind, we're on her body, we're with her movement."

Egoyan's *Salome 3.0* will be unveiled to audiences this month – and it remains to be seen how the revised sequence will be perceived, at a time when news of the online distribution of images of the alleged rape of teenage girls from Steubenville, Ohio, to Cole Harbour, N.S., has led to a fevered debate about our disturbing, increasingly voyeuristic society.

COC general director Alexander Neef thinks the changes will lead to a less emotional reaction to the sexual violence than in previous incarnations. "It's going to give it a little bit more distance – to look at it a little more objectively and maybe not feel that visceral about it," he says.

As for Egoyan, he's pleased to have had a third chance to tackle one of the most famous sequences in stage history – and looks forward to making a first impression on a new generation of opera-goers with his interpretation. "I'm not trying to dull the effect of it – I think, in fact, it's stronger the way we're staging it now," he says. "It's just you're not bludgeoned with it."

**VIDEO**
**What shocks Atom Egoyan**

As he returns to famously controversial opera *Salome* at the Canadian Opera Company, the film and stage director talks about the theatre, film and opera that makes him avert his gaze

[tgam.ca/arts](http://tgam.ca/arts)