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Is contemporary opera too safe? Composer Philip Venables sets out his manifesto for a new opera that shocks and provokes, and salutes some inspiring practitioners of the form, alongside others from theatre, film and cabaret.

New opera is too safe. Even Thomas Adès' end-of-the-pier blowjob bored me. The piece had a great sense of humour and all, but the *succès de scandale* of his *Powder Her Face* (1995) was blown out of all proportion; it was nothing that umpteen filmmakers, artists, theatre directors and Andy Warhol had not done decades before. Even Strauss' *Salome*, ninety years earlier, was a lot more provocative.

Have you ever seen contemporary opera in Britain and been shocked, unnerved, outraged, or even just a little pissed off? Probably not; I haven't. All the other contemporary arts have had anarchic movements and anti-establishment manifestos, from Futurism to Dadaism to the 'Post Porn Modernist Manifesto'. But not opera. New opera still seems shackled to the corpse of the old: "dead, repetitive, predictable, pretty", according to [Robert Thicknesse in The Guardian](#). Most modern art rails against conservatism; is new opera its last bastion?

British opera-makers – and their funders – ought to be fighting this

stagnation tooth and nail. But, sadly, I don't smell revolution in the air. Instead, I fear the younger generation may be a bunch of puritans, peddling conventional fare that is composer-centric and far too didactic. I can't remember the last time I came away from a British performance feeling like it had actually opened up a dialogue with me. Instead all I got was predictably angular vocal lines and obstructive music.

Let's shake it up! We need a revolution. A manifesto for new opera; a re-think from first principles. [Louise Bourgeois](#) said, "What modern art means is that you have to keep finding new ways to express yourself...modern art is about this painful situation of having no absolutely definite way of expressing yourself." She's right; however painful, opera desperately needs a new way.

So – a rallying call to composers: forget every grand opera we've ever seen and eliminate every grandiose vision of our work gracing the main stage of the Royal Opera House. Once we've got over that vanity, everything else is up for grabs, from what our message is, to how we say it, to how we present it.

I want the *content* of new opera to be provocative, abstract, violent, challenging, political. I want to be shocked, affronted, disturbed, challenged, riled by opera's extreme, brutal opinions. Why is politically outspoken opera so rare, compared with the other arts? Just like other art forms, opera can protest

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injustice, expose psychological problems and help us deal with human catastrophe – and it should. Of course I don't want opera to become a vacuous freak show like R Kelly's 'hip hopera', *Trapped in the Closet*, but new operas have to be relevant to today's world, not always reeking of the spirit of Grand Opera.

There are performers who use their work to shock, provoke and challenge. David Hoyle – who once described gay culture as “the biggest suicide cult in history” – delivers a molotov mix of political rant, dance, performance, live painting, song and nonchalant sexual voyeurism. His latest episodes of *Licking Wounds*, performed in May at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, are a vehicle for his anger, dissatisfaction and socio-political criticism, all viciously delivered. Similarly, Bruce Labruce's films regularly spit in the face of polite society. But the aesthetic of his *LA Zombie* (2010) or *Otto, or up with dead people* (2008) wouldn't be possible without the shocking, perverse, violent, sexual images. The twisted, psychological darkness in Lars von Trier's film *Antichrist* (2009) is another example of shock-value beauty. But unlike any opera I've ever seen, Trier doesn't project a moral judgement, but instead invites his audience into a discourse with the subject matter.

The *style* of new opera must be bold, direct and self-assured, whatever the

creators' chosen aesthetic. Opera has a natural propensity for the absurd and the fantastical, so let's exploit it. Similarly, opera is the greatest 'multimedia' genre in history. But while classical concert promoters are going nuts for multimedia in an often-uninspired struggle for new audiences, opera usually lags behind. Every inch of new opera should be genuinely collaborative, engaging theatre, film, visual art, design, literature, performance art, dance, cabaret. It shouldn't be about a megalomaniac composer.

Beat Furrer's *Begehren* (2001) has a fresh style, for example. Like other imaginative works by Enno Poppe and Heiner Goebbels, *Begehren* doesn't even call itself opera. Indeed, the two nameless figures 'He' and 'She' rarely sing but instead utter consonants, clicks, wheezes and gasps. The text is entirely incidental: nothing happens – no broken heart, consumption, suicide, madness, love story or murder. Time passes slowly, gracefully, yet the musical landscape glimmers with detail. Furrer knows how to use – or not use – the voice; and these voices communicate the shards of text clearly and directly. Simultaneously dance, concert, installation, theatre and opera, *Begehren's* style is a collusion of many; a mongrel with a crystal-clear identity. It and it alone defines the way it wants to be, as if Furrer had never stepped foot in La Scala.



Clockwise from left: Copy & Waste, *Begehren*, David Hoyle

OPERA HAS A NATURAL PROPENSITY FOR THE ABSURD AND THE FANTASTICAL, SO LET'S EXPLOIT IT

Finally, the *presentation* of new opera should interact with other arts, with its audience and with its environment. Berlin company Gob Squad breaks down boundaries of theatre with absurdly adventurous interactions with video, design, improvisation, poetry, performance art, social action and even the audience. The action in *Gob Squad's Kitchen (You've never had it so good)* (2009), for example, was almost completely concealed from the audience and relayed only through live video. Another recent production involved coercing audience members to improvise, drink vodka shots and learn the electric guitar. Sounds fun? Yes, but it's not just frivolity: the members of Gob Squad re-think theatre, and I always come away challenged, thoughtful and sometimes wasted.

But for the really adventurous, why not make opera truly divorced from the Veuve Cliquot and red velvet, in public spaces, nightclubs, sports centres, shopping malls, warehouses, railway stations – or just in your own home. I recently saw a theatre, song, video art and music piece by theatre company Copy & Waste in Berlin, called *Wasteler* (2010). It took place in an enormous industrial hangar where a concrete

pre-fab house had been built as the stage from reclaimed communist housing from former East Berlin, surrounded by a few makeshift benches for the audience. Simple, coloured neon tubes lit the concrete for different scenes of incredibly fast and rhythmic dialogue, interspersed with hypnotizing, Tetris-esque projections and even a session of Chat Roulette. Like Gob Squad's production, some of the action inside the house was only seen through live video. Everything in the piece fed off its industrial-domestic setting, in a way that would have been impossible in a conventional theatre.

So, opera-makers: stop playing safe! Shock us! Take off your gloves, and let's get dirty. Bigger risks desperately need to be taken if contemporary opera is to have any chance of electrifying audiences rather than boring them. Let's simply indulge our wildest operatic fantasies and make them happen. Any number of starting points could help

Listening post



David Hoyle



Gob Squad archive



Beat Furrer, *Begehren*



Copy & Waste videos

us: Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, Sylvia Plath's *Daddy*, Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* would all make great operas, by my taste. I want all of these ideas in opera, and more. Dangerous, direct, offensive, absurd, violent, political, sexual, provocative - yes! Dance, theatre, film, poetry, cabaret - yes please! Opera in a dungeon, warehouse, shopping mall - yes again! Predictable, angular, over-composed, safe; inaudible words; megalomaniac composers - no thank you! Whatever you do, I hope you'll all come up with your own ideas much more more shocking – and meaningful – than a flaccid blowjob.

Philip Venables is a composer who is thinking about writing his first opera.
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