

GOING INTO SHADOWS

An opera by Andrew Schultz with a libretto by Julianne Schultz

THE MAKING OF AN OPERA: ARTICLES AND ANALYSIS

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Von der fürchterlichen Verwüstung, die die Druckpresse anrichtet, kann man sich heute noch gar keine Vorstellung machen. Das Luftschiff wird erfunden und die Phantasie kriecht wie eine Postkutsche. Automobil, Telephon und die Riesenaufgaben des Stumpfsinns – wer kann sagen, wie die Gehirne der zweitnächsten Generation beschaffen sein werden?

Of the terrible devastation which is being wrought by the printing press it is still not possible today to have any conception. The airship is invented and the imagination crawls along like a stage-coach. Automobile, telephone and the mass dissemination of stupidity – who can say what the brains of the next generation will be like?

Karl Kraus, *Die Fackel*

Shadows for sale:

lonely voices,
mass media and
Andrew Schultz's
Going Into Shadows

Dalya M. Crispin

In January 1908, Karl Kraus delivered this one of numerous warnings about the potential disempowerment of the individual by the excesses of the mass media. Just under a century later, with the advent of television, his apprehensions have been realised to a far greater degree than he envisioned; while one may agree to a certain extent with Gianni Vattimo's assertion that the reading of the newspaper is 'the morning prayer of the truly modern man', it is more likely that that most sizable 'congregations' will be found in front of breakfast television programmes, taking in their easily assimilatable collages of soundbite news, chat and cookery tips. Behind the amiability of such programmes the ferocity of network competition for ratings creates a dizzying scramble to be 'First with the Truth'. So powerful is this imperative that the 'news' is available on 24-hour channels – for a price. The more ubiquitous this 'First Truth' appears to be, the more elusive it becomes in actuality.

The 'First Truth' of *Going Into Shadows* initially appears to concern the precarious relationship of Bernadette and Tarik, their attempts to overcome barriers of cultural difference in a multicultural but nevertheless intolerant milieu. In the 'Burlesque' scene of Act 1, the crowds revile the 'outsiders' Tarik and Bernadette, Caitlin and Damon, but in rhythms and intervallic language that betray indebtedness to those very non-Western cultures which are under attack. The potential conflict in the bar is postponed through the televisual interruption of the news reporter, Jack Johns, who is announced by a typical rhythmic soundbite. (The name itself is a kind of soundbite, with the first name 'Jack' being a diminutive of the surname, a signal concerning, perhaps, a lack of substance.) His announcement of a terrorist bomb attack unleashes bar-room chanting of the initials of organisations associated with terrorism, placed side-by-side with the identifying initials of global television networks, both using the same musical motifs. The scene ends with Jack Johns' rhythmic soundbite sign-off, echoed in major thirds.

The motif 'hook' associated with Jack Johns could be interpreted as a post-modern operatic commentary on the leitmotivic musical language of nineteenth-century Wagnerianism, with Johns being a kind of millennial Wotan, whose utterances are made 'real' through his power as a television figure. Significantly, however, Johns does not have to face Wotan's final moral reckoning: in the Ring, specifically during his lengthy monologue in *Die Walküre*, Wotan experiences a growing realisation that his departures from truth, his breaching of the contracts which regulate his realm, will result in the end of his world – Valhalla and its gods. Johns' breaching and revision of the 'First Truth' in *Going Into Shadows* leave him with no reckoning but a 'Lifetime Award', a self-congratulatory laud of his world, the media. Johns' elevation into full-scale media godhood is symbolised by the non-presence of his person; it is all too appropriate that the media critique this opera embodies should conclude with an enforced viewing of a television newsreel.

The newsreel presents the tragedy of Bernadette in a series of whispered clichéd news headlines, from which all the musical substance is drained. Only the name of Jack Johns is presented as music, gathering to a full-blown triple *forte* before the final fade to black. In effect, each episode in the story is robbed of its power, and the participants stripped of their identities. The only name given in the series of headlines is that of Johns: Bernadette becomes 'Pregnant Lover'; Tarik is called merely 'Father'; and, most ironically, Jasmine is labelled 'Video Daughter'. Implicit in this is the reading of a person as a 'type', one of the preconditions of racial conflict. The

'selves' that were Bernadette, Tarik and Jasmine become commodified.

Indeed, the musical language of the opera as a whole points up the potentially objectifying and homogenising effects of cultural assimilation – some of which masquerades as multiculturalism, both in the manner in which the ethnicity of the musics of Bernadette and Tarik becomes sapped through incorporation into the whole and the way in which the wordless commentary of the 'shadow music' of Act 1 reflects fragmentation of the view from within the world of the opera, into worlds of observed and observer, and of the possessed and dispossessed of language itself. There is a particular pathos in much of this music, an outsider's music. A particularly striking example is the 'Strange Hymn' that follows the visit to Bernadette's home (with its television switched on but, significantly, silent). Ostensibly, it heralds the upcoming wedding of Tarik and Bernadette in its interweaving of musical styles, yet the very title echoes a sense of alienation: it recalls the opening scene of the opera in which Bernadette applies the 'strange' adjective to fruit left in Tarik's hotel room; this in turn foreshadows the agency, the poisoned fruit, with which Tarik's daughter will kill him. (Even the term 'strange fruit' may be construed as a cultural borrowing, being the title of a jazz standard made famous by Billie Holiday.)

Such interweaving creates within the work a humane sense of the frailty of its characters, who are unequal to the combination of the struggles of day-to-day existence with the windswept political landscapes that are presented within the story. The aporetic nature of this position is reflected all too accurately in current world events; its price is a sense of humanity itself. When Bernadette betrays Tarik for the price of her 'story', her own decline, and that of

her daughter, gains a sense of inevitability. Her story, as news, is rendered tawdry; the middle-class security that she purchases for her daughter cannot repair the relationship between them. If love, as represented by the relationship between Tarik and Bernadette in Act 1 of the opera, is a potentially positive force of nature, then the 'civilising'

tendencies of the media are exposed in this opera as the inverse, as antithetical to both nature and love. Such destruction seems impervious to 'Justice Ancient and Blind':

Manches zur Liebe bestimmte
Geschöpf wird das Opfer grossen
...Nächstenhasses. Sie setzen sich
allein Pfeilen aus, die die soziale Welt
für ihre Leugner bereit halt, leisten der
Natur Gefolgschaft und gehen in dem
Vernichtungskriege unter, der das hehrste
Schauspiel dieser subalternen Zeit vorstellt.
Was weiss ein Staatsanwalt davon?

Many a creature destined for love becomes the victim of the great principle of brotherly hatred. They expose themselves to all the arrows which the social world holds ready for those who disavow it, follow the command of nature and are destroyed in the great war of annihilation which represents the most sublime spectacle of this inferior age. What does a public prosecutor know of this?²

Karl Kraus, *Die Fackel*

The interwoven themes of *Going Into Shadows* thus continue a critique which is present in many of Schultz's earlier works, from the exposition of aboriginal disenfranchisement of the opera *Black River*, to the settings of fragmentary and disintegrating gravestone epitaphs which form the *Dead Songs* cycle, all of which expose the potentially ephemeral nature of the past, and the dangerous ease with which we forget. Schultz offers no transcendental post-modern utopia, but instead confronts the listener with an often dolorous musical rhetoric exposing these profound sorrows, remnants of 'the still, sad music of humanity'.³

Notes

1. Karl Kraus, *Die Fackel* 241: 14–15, in Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus: Apocalyptic Satirist – Culture and Catastrophe in Habsburg Vienna* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986) p. 150.
2. Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 10, in John Deathridge, 'Wagner and the Post-Modern', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, July 1992 (4:2) p. 143.
3. Karl Kraus, *Die Fackel* 263: 6–7, in Timms, *Karl Kraus*, p. 86.
4. William Wordsworth, 'Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey'.