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Eurydice:

A Stunning New Opera

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Eurydice Descending

A new opera
is a matter of
life and death

By: David Barbour



The Underworld's walls of charred wood (really, painstakingly carved Styrofoam) make a solid surface for the projections. Above is one example of the many fonts used to indicate which character is singing.

In an extraordinary sign of the times, New York's Metropolitan Opera, long a repository of the standard repertory, has made a strong commitment to new works. Having opened the season with Terence Blanchard's *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, a critical and popular success, the company quickly followed up with the equally well-received *Eurydice*. Composed by Matthew Aucoin and featuring a libretto by Sarah Ruhl based on her 2004 play of the same name, it casts a haunting spell, especially thanks to Mary Zimmerman's production, a co-commission from the Metropolitan and Los Angeles Operas.

All new operas represent a major risk and this one even more so, thanks to the well-worn subject matter. Between Jacopo Peri's *Euridice*, staged in 1600 and considered the first extant opera, and Aucoin's *Eurydice*, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice has inspired more than 70 works. *Eurydice* is the rare version to put the female character front and center. In Ruhl's telling, Eurydice's story is a magic-realist fable focusing on our common struggle to

understand the mystery of death. As staged by Zimmerman, one of Western civilization's foundational myths is given a strikingly contemporary treatment.

As the opera begins, the radiant young Eurydice is delighted to accept Orpheus' marriage proposal. Wandering away from her wedding reception, she is accosted by an enigmatic figure who claims to have a letter from her late, much-mourned father. Intrigued, she returns with the stranger to his apartment, unaware that he is Hades, king of the Underworld. Dispatched there, she is reunited with her father, although she doesn't immediately recognize him; death has untethered her from her earthly existence. Spending time with him, however, she slowly begins to regain her shattered memory along with her grasp of human language. Meanwhile, Orpheus, desperate to recover Eurydice, uses his musical gifts to gain entrance to the Underworld. Hades makes his famous bargain with Orpheus: He can return to the world, bringing Eurydice with him but, en route, he may not turn and look at her.

You know how that turns out. In Ruhl's version, the tragedy is compounded by a series of twists causing all three protagonists to end up bathed in the waters of forgetfulness. It's a finale that one suspects Thornton Wilder would have loved and it can linger in one's mind long after the final curtain.

Zimmerman's production features scenery by Daniel Ostling and lighting by TJ Gerckens; all three are longtime collaborators; among other projects, they have provided the Met with revivals of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Rusalka*, and *La Sonnambula*. *Eurydice* features an unusually seamless production design that strikes a profound contrast between the living world and Underworld. (Ana Kuzmanic's costumes play a major role, too.) In addition, S. Katy Tucker's projections integrate the libretto into the onstage action in a novel way. *Eurydice* provides additional evidence at the Metropolitan Opera is on the march, looking to redefine itself for 21st-century audiences.

In a sense, *Eurydice* spent time of its own in the Underworld, having opened in Los Angeles in February 2020, a few weeks before lockdown began. Since then, the careers of all involved have been put on hold. It therefore seems most appropriate that it should be part of the Met's return to life.

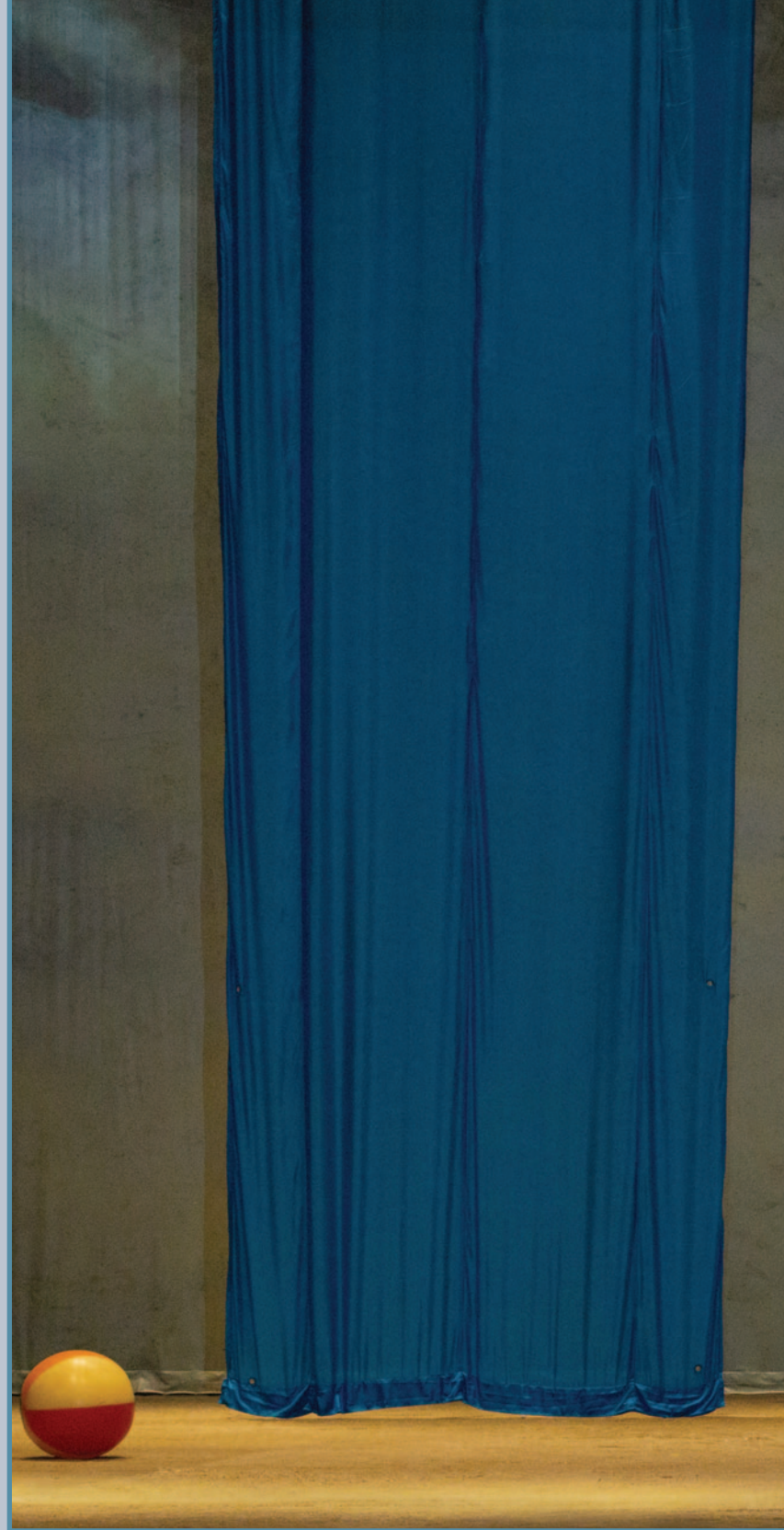
Upperworld and Underworld

In conceiving the design, Ostling says that Zimmerman "had the very distinct image of a box, with a world within it that would move up and down. We both felt there had to be a sense of up-and-down movement—which, onstage, is difficult to do." Nevertheless, it is central to the production's effect.


Working with Zimmerman's idea, Ostling designed a box set, its walls covered with RP screen that has been treated with paint. It takes light beautifully, allowing Gerckens to wash it, creating a variety of colors and moods. The early scenes take place on a beach in broad daylight; the sun is represented by a disc hanging upstage left. To the right of it, representing the ocean, hangs a bold of blue China silk, which, eventually, will be lifted to create the canopy at Eurydice and Orpheus' wedding ceremony.

The effect is bright and airy, a carefree setting for the romance of Eurydice and Orpheus. In one sign of the pandemic's effect, the long pause between productions quite literally caused some wrinkles. "When we got to the lighting tech at the Met," Ostling says, "the walls showed some wear and tear. Every wrinkle could be seen. They had been sitting, basically folded, for a year and a half, which wasn't great. Bob Moody [the charge scenic] had to cover it with a flat matte sealer." By opening night, the look was entirely seamless.

The concept of vertical transit between worlds is established early on. The character known as Orpheus' Friend, a kind of doppelganger figure (a countertenor role), flies in



on a swing decorated with musical notes. Next, Eurydice's father rises via a lift located downstage left. Decorated with a dark, charred-wood interior (more about that in a moment), it contains an eclipsed sun, the opposite of the orb in the beach scene. A small writing table is included, an appropriate touch as the aria that follows consists of the text of his letter to his daughter.



I'd better tie a string
around your finger to remind you.

The Act I beach scene features a sun-washed look and a vertical bolt of blue China silk to suggest the ocean.

More up and down movement: Amusingly, Eurydice meets Hades at a water cooler, then follows him up a dauntingly steep staircase that appears out of the wings downstage right; a minute later, they descend another staircase, located upstage of its predecessor, entering an

apartment decorated in midcentury modern style and populated by weird-looking servants. Ostling describes it as “a bachelor pad,” which is exactly the vibe it sends out. By the end of the scene, the set’s sand-colored ground cloth will have vanished through a trap door, followed by

Eurydice, who falls into the Underworld.

Also, there are boxes within boxes: At the beginning of the apartment scene, a new three-sided surround is lowered in, with the same charred-wood look seen in the father's elevator. This sets the tone for most of the action in Acts II and III, which mostly take place in the dark, stony, chilly Underworld. Ostling says finding the right material was a key challenge. "I knew I wanted it to be dark, and it couldn't be painted black or, say, Duvetyne." Working on a ballet in Tokyo, he was introduced to an artist, Toshikatsu Endo, "who uses an old Japanese technique of burning wood, shou sugi ban, which preserves it in a way. He creates these huge wooden circles and burns them." Inspired by this technique, the designer labored with his assistants, burning materials to get the right look. When the set was built at The Scenic Route, in Pacoima, California scenic artists carved the walls out of Styrofoam. "The carving took a long time," Ostling says. "The Styrofoam was painted black, with a warm coffee color added in, but it looked a little dead, so we put in some silver and feathered. Then we added an uneven glaze." The result is remarkably bleak and rock-like. (The Singing Stones, residents of the Underworld, are outfitted with costumes by Kuzmani that convincingly mimic this look.)

When Eurydice enters the Underworld, it is via an elevator unit that lowers in. The door opens and she appears, holding an umbrella as rain falls on her—her first encounter with the memory-erasing waters of Lethe. A tank built into the unit's upper section is responsible for

the wet weather. The lift is seen three times, first with Eurydice's father for the letter scene; then with Orpheus and his friend, mourning Eurydice's loss; and, finally, outfitted with a shower unit where her father douses his memory into oblivion. "The first and second units are the same structure," Ostling says. After the first appearance, "the charred walls and sun are pulled out and the bottom is pulled off. The second time it appears, it is sitting off the ground, with a sand floor and a different sun. At intermission, it gets rolled off, and the shower unit is installed."

For the climax, in which Orpheus tries to lead Eurydice back to life, another box is inserted, this time a low-rise surround that represents the bright world of earthly life. Details include a low-hanging sun and asphodels, flowers traditionally associated with the Elysian Fields, sprouting from the deck. This episode ends tragically, sending Eurydice to her fate.

With its elevators, rigging elements, and box-in-box-in-box construction, the set required a considerable amount of engineering. Ostling, who is based in Taipei, went to Los Angeles to deliver the drawings, staying there five months until the opera's premiere. "That way," he says, "I could deal with engineers every day if I needed to, making changes with them on their computers. When we got to the point of doing the budget, we worked it out in real time. I was there for all of the rehearsals, which is the way that Mary and I like to work."

The seamless result "shows that everyone was in the room together, working," Ostling says. "I design very much



This insert into the Underworld set suggests that the characters are well on their way back to life on earth until Orpheus, defying Hades, turns around and looks at Eurydice.



At times, scenes set in the Underworld feature an infernal red wash. Note the shower unit, which rises on a lift.

with the lighting in mind. TJ and I have worked together for 23 years. He's a dream lighting designer because he gets involved very early. My sets tend to be very limiting and difficult to light; he has to be involved or we're in trouble! He looks at the set and we come up with lighting positions; it's a partnership that continues into tech."

The production also has an evocative show curtain featuring what, to this writer's eyes, looks like mountains rendered in charcoal grey on a beige background; in fact, it functions rather like a Rorschach test and is the result of the production's singular process. The team was hired relatively late, Ostling notes, at a time when he had numerous projects in the pipeline. "The drawings were due in May 2019," he says. The telescoped time frame added to the pressure: "They agreed to have the due dates be basically the day before they started building. The engineering and artistic aspect would have to be correct, and it had to be on budget. We were setting ourselves up for failure."

"I opened another show with Mary and flew back to Taipei. I got into my apartment at 10pm and taped my windows over with cardboard. The next morning, I started

designing nonstop, for two weeks straight, not looking back. I compiled 15 ideas, some full-fledged and some rougher. I showed them to Mary, and we boiled it down to four different ideas, one of which was this inkblot. Mary thought it could be an act curtain, as it combined light and darkness. I tried to create something that everyone could fill in for themselves." He adds, laughing, "One review said, 'The opera starts out naturalistically, with a landscape painting.' Really? Anyway, it's beautifully painted."

Sunshine and solar eclipses

Gerckens also stresses the importance of his longtime collaboration with Zimmerman and Ostling, especially in the case of a premiere. "I've been working with Dan and Ana for years and with Mary since 1993, and we're used to doing new work." On the downside, "there was only a piano recording of a workshop production, and we knew it had been revised since then. We didn't fully know what it sounded like until we got to the sitzprobe in LA."

Gerckens echoes Ostling's comment about their mutual approach to the technical problems of scenery and light-



The same lift used for the shower on the previous spread also delivers this unit, which contains Eurydice's father and a writing desk.

ing: "Daniel has a tendency to create sets that are extremely challenging to light, but he always has in his mind how he wants them to take light." For example, the Act I surround "is a bony white, swirled with blue. It's not uniform in its treatment; bits of ochre and sienna are added in. We tested 12 sets of swatches with different paint treatments before making the final choice." He creates a warm sunlight wash for the early scenes, then treats the surround with a deep ocean blue for the wedding reception, which turns into a dance party complete with mirror ball effect.

Then there's the Underworld, with those stark, dark, rocky walls. "Their texture is amazing," Gerckens says. "In LA, we had a rig that allowed me to position a series of downlights to get at that really steep skim and pop out the textures. At the Met, I didn't have that flexibility and I was worried about how much we would lose. But I was pleasantly surprised at the depth that we got. You would think it would suck up light but with all the little details, it gets into all the nooks and crannies."

Especially at the Met, most of Gerckens' design hinges

on overhead and side angles; aside from the opening beach scene, front light is virtually absent. "I have a proscenium slot wash that comes on for the beach, and some individual specials into the boxes onstage [including Eurydice's elevator and the lifts]. But that's pretty much it for the front light. Our cast has nine principals, and the Met has six followspot operators as standard, and they're so good. They can do things I wouldn't dream of at another theatre. The guideline to Keri [Thibodeau, assistant staff lighting designer], who is in charge of the spots, was, as much as possible, to just subtly, barely fill in the faces in the Underworld, but to let the sidelight dominate—especially at the end of Act II, when it is really dark."

The designer added positions atop the cycs. "The units are mounted to the trusses that the RPs are hung from," he says. "I also had to hang a position of four moving lights just downstage of the charred black walls to light them and to light the swing [bearing Orpheus' friend] when it flies in; they also light the blue fabric. But most of the light was from overhead, using the Met's plot."

The latter, he says, "is a phenomenal rig of Elation

Professional fixtures,” which includes Artiste Monets and Chorus Line ST LED battens. “I’m really impressed with Monets, their color and brightness. I generally don’t find frosts useful in moving lights, but in this fixture, you can put the smaller frost in, for fuzzy effects, and you can put the larger frost in and it’s almost like a wash that you can put shutter cuts in.

“All of the lower cyc lighting is done with [Chroma-Q] Color Force IIs on wagons, with LED tape mounted on the wagons’ fasciae to get a horizon glow for the wedding dance,” Gerckens continues. “I also use Source Four PARs to shoot under the walls. When the scene changes to Hades’ apartment, the wagons get rolled off. That’s a hundred-odd feet of Color Forces and their cables. The charred sidewalls have built-in lighting: Source Four Lustrs, vertically mounted, with mirrors, battery-operated and using wireless DMX.” At the top of Act II, an effect of light shining through holes in the walls, creating a striking cross-hatch of beams, is created using tiny Gantom units.

Another engineering challenge involved building lighting into the elevator and lift units. “Daniel and I worked closely on that,” Gerckens says, “We have LED tape in all the nooks and crannies. The shower unit has Astera Titan Tubes. Each scenic unit is self-contained, with a set of plugs; when the lift gets changed out at intermission, the whole plug system gets reset. Each box comes up out of that downstage trap with its own set of lights.” The eclipsed sun unit, seen in the lift during the father’s letter

aria, features a ring of LED tape bouncing off the back of the box, very close behind it.

Throughout, Gerckens says he relies heavily on sidelight because “it’s so beautifully sculptural,” but also because “you want to maintain the darkness of the environment in the background. Sidelight is especially critical at the end of the second act; that world is lit in the last 15 minutes from shinbuster sidelights. The ability it gives you to carve out is endless.” He also employs a subtle, yet crucial, touch: “After being in an environment that is all native HMI or LED lighting on so many productions, almost all the scenes in the Underworld have a bit of green added to the cold white from the Monets and a handful of Vari-Lite units that we use, to pull us from the pure white to a dimmer, more existentially bleak place.” (The Met rep plot contains VL3500s and VL4000s.) Lighting is controlled by an ETC Eos.

Words on scenery

S. Katy Tucker came onboard at the Met to add surtitles that are projected directly onto the scenery. A plan to do this in Los Angeles with other personnel was abandoned for lack of time. Tucker, in contrast, wasn’t pressed for time: “I preprogrammed everything during the pandemic, building it with Brad Peterson, my associate designer and programmer. It was a leisurely process, over several months, but it was still a lot of work.”

Tucker says that she understood the creative team’s impulse to include projected titles, as language is integral



Gerckens often makes use of sidelight to carve out the actors, a particularly effective strategy in the dark depths of the Underworld.

to the effect of *Eurydice*; nevertheless, she felt the need to justify her work. “I needed a design perspective so that they don’t feel utilitarian. I watched the production videos, read the libretto, and listened to the music,” all of which led her to a conclusion: “The titles should have a journey, just like *Eurydice*. We experience the opera from her point of view, so I wanted the titles to evolve with her character.”

Tucker achieves this goal using a variety of fonts. “Each choice means something,” she says. “*Eurydice* experiences the world through literature, so I wanted to use [the font] P22 Franklin Caslon, which is largely used for printing books. I also wanted something hand-pressed. When she goes to the Underworld and doesn’t understand language the way she did before, it made me think of scribbles, cuneiform, and primitive languages. After that, we decided the text should be different for each character. For example, the father’s letter uses a kind of scroll font. Sarah Ruhl sent me letters from her late father; the character is based on him. I created a font based on his handwriting.” Similarly, *Eurydice*’s letter to Orpheus is based on Ruhl’s penmanship.

Tucker also experimented with different colors of fonts, for example, lime green for Hades. “It was Mary’s idea,” she says. “It helps the audience connect to whoever is singing; also, parts of the libretto move very quickly, and this helps audiences keep track.” In what is surely the most poignant effect, Orpheus, in the Underworld, calls out *Eurydice*’s name. Because she is losing her grasp of language, the title visibly decays, fading away.

Then there was the matter of placing the titles onto the already-designed set. “We have projectors in the proscenium slots to hit the angled walls, but it was still a challenge to get them in a place so that everyone in the audience could read them,” Tucker says. “We’re happy that they also had the Met Titles system to look at.” The production uses six Panasonic laser projectors with lenses, four (with LE20 lenses) on the balcony rail and two (with LE10 lenses) in the proscenium slots. The images are delivered via a disguise 4x4 pro media server, running r18 software, connected to a grandMA console.

“The calibration was super-challenging,” Tucker adds. “We ran in rep with *Porgy and Bess*, which used LE 10 lenses. Trying to make the changeover less time-consuming, I used them in summer tech, too, but we needed something tighter, especially with the harder-to-read images. The text is so unforgiving. We used a one-pixel grid to check our alignment; you have to put the calibration points at the same point when changing lenses, but we have a ground cloth and once it goes in, we don’t know where are. We had to find something that could always be the same.”

Like Gerckens, Tucker had to deal with the darkness and contours of the rock wall scenery. “The texture, which I am absolutely in love with, gives us a bit of texture; Daniel’s set



This elevator unit, which delivers souls to the Underworld, is lowered in.

is just asking to be lit and projected on. But we needed all our horsepower because the wall doesn’t give us much punch. That’s why we switched to the tighter lens.”

In addition to the text, Tucker provides images, such as trees and clouds, that fit unobtrusively into the look of each scene. Still, one wonders if her text-on-scenery approach might not find broader applications. As the *New York Times* review points out, it lets “the audience focus fully on the action.”

Eurydice ran at the Met through December 16, although it may return in subsequent seasons, especially given its popularity. With this production, the company and Los Angeles Opera may have made a significant addition to the modern operatic repertory. A timeless myth has found a new source of life. 🌿