

WOMAN ON THE VERGE



A new opera about a transgender pioneer makes its US debut

By: David Barbour

One of the buzzy events in the music world this summer was the US premiere, at Santa Fe Opera, of Tobias Picker's *Lili Elbe*. It's an unusual, even daring, work, focusing on the journey of a real-life transgender woman in the post-World War One era, who risked her life to undergo gender-affirming surgery. If you've seen the Oscar-winning *The Danish Girl*, you're familiar with the story's outlines, although Aryeh Lev Stollman's libretto is based on the historical record (including Elbe's memoir, *Man Into Woman*), not the novel that is the film's source.

In any version, the story is astonishing. Elbe, born in 1882, was originally known as Einar Wegener, a landscape painter of some note. He married Gerda Gottlieb, another artist, in 1904. But Wegener's personal odyssey was only beginning. By 1912, he and Gottlieb were living in Paris, with Wegener passing as female and assuming the role of her sister-in-law. During the 1920s, Wegener took the identity of Lili, living publicly as a woman. In 1930, the couple traveled to Germany, where Lili had a series of transformational surger-

ies. The early procedures were successful; meanwhile, Lili became a news sensation, rather like Christine Jorgensen a generation later. Amazingly for the era, her transition was legally recognized by the Danish government, automatically dissolving her marriage. But a fourth procedure, involving a uterus transplant, proved a bridge too far, and she died from complications. It's a story of extraordinary courage, a tragedy that contains tantalizing questions: What would Lili's life have been like had she lived?

It's a question that cuts to the heart of James Robinson's production at Santa Fe Opera. *Lili Elbe*'s 2023 premiere at Theater St. Gallen in Switzerland was firmly in the regietheater tradition, with abstract scenery, sometimes anachronistic costumes, strange makeup, and performer-flying effects. Robinson's staging, a co-production with Seattle Opera, where he is general and artistic director, takes another approach, firmly placing Lili's story in the world of between-the-wars Europe. It's a canny choice, underlining the incredible, unprecedented risks that Lili takes, her implicit challenge to conventional morality.

(Among the production's many notable aspects, Lili is



Left: Lili is played by the baritone Lucia Lucas, the first transgender person to perform a principal role on an American operatic stage. Above: Robinson's staging firmly places Lili's story in the world of between-the-wars Europe.

played by the baritone Lucia Lucas, the first transgender person to perform a principal role on an American operatic stage. The 2021 documentary, *The Sound of Identity*, available on YouTube, covers her history-making appearance in the title role of *Don Giovanni* at Tulsa Opera.)

In any case, the production has been well-received. According to *Opera Today*, "Set designer Allen Moyer has achieved a minor miracle with his use of bi-parting upstage panels which revealed a variety of locales, and two slip stages on either side that ferried well-chosen set pieces on and off with fluidity. Greg Emetaz is a widely admired projection and video designer, and his work on this occasion filled the stage with potent imagery that complemented the scenic transitions and commented on the orchestral musings that separated the brief scenes...Marcus Doshi's atmospheric lighting was another key visual delight, whether bright and playful, sulky and portentous, or all points in between."

Aiming for realism

Robinson's direction may also be a more suitable fit for a score as melodic as *Lili Elbe*'s. Still, it poses many design challenges. Not least is the fact that it unfolds across 15 scenes and 13 locations, including the Royal Danish Theatre (the actress Anna Larssen is a prominent character); an art gallery; Einar and Gerda's bedroom; their Paris apartment; a Paris mansion; the Tuileries Gardens; the Paris apartment of the gynecologist Kurt Warnekros; the palace of Christian X, King of Denmark; Lili's mother's house in Jutland; Les Deux Magots in Paris; a garden; and Lili's hospital room. Moyer notes that Robinson called for an additional location during the opera's prologue, but, he says, wryly, "I don't count that. I mean, once you get past ten..."

Speaking about fitting so many scenes into the dimensions of Santa Fe's amphitheater, Moyer says, "When you're dealing with a piece like this, in any space, you have to think about the fact that these locations could be





Left: "The dominant gesture for most scenes came through the two side doors," Doshi says. "I had a moving light and an [ETC] Lustr in each doorway." Above: According to one review, Emetaz's projections "flicker like memories along the back of the set."

heavy with furniture. It's not like you can have a big statement and a little projection. You can have people moving furniture, of course, at least once or twice, but these days we're used to seeing things slide magically into place. Also, once we were in the theatre, we had to add music and slow down the scenic transitions to accommodate difficult costume changes." (The costumes are by Marco Piemontese.)

"But, you know, we're basically asked to do movies onstage; it's what you expect," Moyer continues. "That doesn't make it any less challenging. I got into the idea of using slip stages early. I'm not a fan of turntables in general, and in Santa Fe we can't do wagons with people to move them. If an opera house doesn't perform in rep, it can handle a certain amount of automation. They can't put down a full deck and add in tracks; also, automation is inherently fragile, so it can't handle being taken up and put down all the time."

On the other hand, Moyer says, "The set is relatively shallow, which is nice, because it gives me room to place scenic units behind it. Then, two big doors in the upstage wall can slide open and expose whatever unit we need. This, combined with the slip stages, does most of the heavy lifting when it comes to furniture."

Scene changes are carefully timed, he notes. "The slip stages are pushed by people; there's a guy on a headset, counting down. I don't think this has ever been done in Santa Fe, not that I can remember, but everybody liked it. The other thing about slip stages that's really underrated is that they give you another tool to do an interesting transition; people moving on them are really beautiful. They're

wonderful things."

The production relies on two slip stages. "It's a wide set, and they extend offstage as far as possible on one side. We added a little bit that flips up as it goes off; it's hinged. We have about 2' or 3'. Since its renovation, the theatre has a lot more off-stage space, so we had enough space for the stages to be loading without people in the audience seeing it."

Moyer adds, "I think the cast really responded to the realistic look, especially Lucia and Sylvia D'Eramo, who plays Gerda. To deal with the complexity of the opera and Lili's character, it helps to have things that help tell the story." He adds, humorously, that he enjoys creating abstract designs ("a big yellow box with dirty laundry all over the floor"), but it all depends on the material. In the case of *Lili Elbe*, he says, "The singers told me they loved the relatively shallow set with hard surfaces; it was great for singing. And at least ten or 12 of them said, 'We love the slip stages.' That was nice to hear because I know they would be dealing with the floor moving beneath them."

Many of the opera's interiors are informed by the work of Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864-1916), a Danish painter known for his minimalist palette and mastery of light. He is also known as the "master of silent interiors." He "overlapped with Einar and Gerda," Moyer says, adding about the artist's aesthetic, "If you live in that part of the world, light becomes most important to you; you learn to paint light beautifully. I was inspired by his beautiful and very lonely interiors. He often painted them with one person; what drew me to this was that loneliness. Even though Lily has the support of Gerda, what a lonely thing to go through



Moyer's set design had to account for 13 locations, including the Royal Danish Theatre; an art gallery; Einar and Gerda's bedroom; their Paris apartment; a Paris mansion; the Tuileries Garden; the Paris apartment of the gynecologist Kurt Warnekros; the palace of Christian X, King of Denmark; Lili's mother's house in Jutland; Les Deux Magots in Paris; a garden; and Lili's hospital room.

because it's the 1920s and she can't tell people what's going on."

Also, he says, in Hammershøi's aesthetic, "There was a

wall color and technique of painting that appealed to me; I tried hard to match it in the scenic surround. I don't feel I did a very good job in the scenic model; it took so long to



paint three little ¼" walls because they required layers and layers. But the painters at Santa Fe did a beautiful job. It also took them a long time."

In one of the production's more surreal touches, Lili's first operation is staged with part of the Royal Danish

Theatre set onstage and audience members in box seats. "We wanted the set to be an operating theatre with a gurney and big lights," Moyer says. "Even before I presented the model, I thought to myself, this scene is supposed to be nightmarish. So, I took those elements and added the theatre, which is where the opera begins. The operation is the first scene of the second act. Instead of people dressed up, watching a show, we have doctors in coats taking notes."

This approach worked for a scene that is already a departure from naturalism, what with Lili looking on at the procedure, singing about her feelings. "She's in the surgery, and she's out of it," Moyer says. "She's out of her body, having a conversation with the doctor." This scenic concept allows for a further parallel. In the opening scene at the theatre, the play onstage is a variation of the Orpheus-Eurydice legend. In the operation scene, Lili is being called back to life, rather like Eurydice. And, Moyer says, "The man who has become her boyfriend, and Gerda, and Lili's mother enter; it's a total nightmare." He adds that the use of footlights in this scene adds to its dreamlike quality.

Video

The production's lighting and video are interwoven so closely that it is often hard to tell which is which. Indeed, rather than obvious graphic or scene-setting ideas, the projections, according to the review in *Broadway World*, "flicker like memories along the back of the set." Of course, with so many scene changes, projections inherently have a role to play. According to Emetaz, "So much is accomplished with Allen's beautiful sets, but even early on I was told I would be helpful with the transitions. Obviously, this is an entire opera about various transitions."

This is a key contribution that projections can bring to any production. "It's all about how to go elegantly from one place to another," Emetaz says. "Part of the challenge here was that the set is incredibly efficient at changing out, even with all that furniture, but the costume changes have to happen, too. We have a scene where the characters are in Copenhagen, waking up in nightgowns. Then they have to be in Paris, months later, totally transformed." In such situations, he adds, "The video had to be like superglue, giving us something to watch and to carry out the Orpheus and Eurydice theme that gets established in the very first scene and is frequently referenced in the music and libretto."

"For me, video design always has to integrate with the music," the designer says. "It's like a visual score that, ideally, interacts with the orchestra. It's a character onstage in the transitions. At times, it is the only character. But we're also working to integrate with what is happening in the libretto. I wanted to work in tandem with all these ideas



Above: "I rarely used conventional fixtures, only when I wanted a very incandescent look in the Countess' mansion," Doshi says. Opposite: "By the time we get to the hospital scene at the end, there's just one front light on the balcony rail, some hidden footlights, and the followspots. I wanted it to look completely exposed and not sentimental. It's as if headlights have been turned on."

and not overwhelm them, just like a good score doesn't overwhelm the singer."

In terms of imagery, Emetaz says, "At Santa Fe, we do what's called the 'projection test,' which took place two-and-a-half weeks before rehearsals started. I brought in a lot of material to see what would function well on the set. We leaned toward material with a very limited color palette but with a refracted light quality. Also, a blurred quality, with things never looking fully in focus but rather more ethereal. We did a shoot of some Orpheus and Eurydice imagery, some of which was incorporated, and that evolved, becoming more layered. I hoped it would take time to understand the imagery in the transitions. Allen once said that the best thing to put on a show curtain is a map, because the audience is spending time with it and it gives them things to look at. In a way, I tried to do something similar with the Orpheus imagery."

Indeed, the Orpheus story is evoked in the projections more than once, often in highly doctored form. "I did a diagonal blur layer on top of the image, giving it the kind of soft focus you see in '20s [film]," Emetaz says, adding that this approach works in part because many films of the era embrace Greek mythology.

In addition, he says, "A lot of the work involved reinforcing

the lighting design in the transitions. The set and the amphitheater limit what Marcus could do, so we worked to find ways to embody the look of Hammershøi's paintings, which inspired much of Allen's scenery. We had a book of them for inspiration. In the paintings, you see these incredible beams of light coming through windows, but unless you have haze, which you definitely can't do at Santa Fe, you can't get it. It became a trompe l'oeil projection event instead."

Other imagery is frankly abstract. "We use a very soft texture in the Tuileries Garden and the women's clinic in Dresden. It's as if there are trees somewhere, shadowing the light. And in some transitions, the imagery becomes diagonal, vibrating lines."

In scene after scene, the question was whether lighting or video could best create a certain effect. The finale unfolds in the room where Lili recovers from her operation (see page 43), featuring a clinical cold white wash. "We explored doing it with video," Emetaz says, "but Marcus had another light that did a better job. In certain transitions, I used the idea of a curtain opening, and the last thing we see is the curtain taking the video away, leaving us with lighting only for the ending. We wanted the scene to feel grounded and immediate for the audience." Other

video effects emulate sunlight coming in through windows.

Emetaz notes, "Allan feels, and I agree, that video shouldn't replace scenery, or do something that scenery could do. It's better to do something that's half-light, half-scenic painting."

The Santa Fe projection system included four Panasonic PT-DZ21KU 20K units and one Panasonic PT-RQ25K 25K laser projector, with images delivered using a Disguise 2x4 Pro media server. "We had one front projector, and the tricky part was getting it under the portal," Emetaz says. "It couldn't cover the cornice, so we had two side projectors that covered the opposite walls and filled in. The video team was incredible. They figured out this setup in an early session, and they made it happen. It was fantastic because otherwise I would have been really limited. We wouldn't have been able to fill all the walls."

Ultimately, he says, "The litmus test for anything we put onstage was: Does it make sense with the music? The best compliment I got from Tobias was, 'It feels like the video is inspired by the music.' There's one moment that has this bubbly quality that immediately made me think of grasslands moving; that's how we transition to Lili's childhood home in Jutland, where she has a disturbing interaction with her mother. It evoked how grasslands can feel like water when the wind is blowing across them. It was

one of those moments where I heard the music and thought: This is what it has to be."

Lighting

Marcus Doshi, too, says he was captivated by Hammershøi's paintings. "Their sense of lighting is very atmospheric and revealing. It's the opposite of, say, Caravaggio. You see everything, but there's a very particular color temperature. It's a quality of northern daylight, and the piece needed as crisp and tight a palette as it could. Allen's set is done in very specific blues and grays, with pops of color, so it was about finding a color temperature to match that and finding variations on the theme.

"Most of the show is a very crisp white, in what the lightboard thinks is 5,600 to 10,000 Kelvin," he continues. "I rarely used conventional fixtures, only when I wanted a very incandescent look in the Countess' mansion and the hallucination scene at the top of Act II. But the lighting always finds its way back to this crispness."

The other main challenge, Doshi says, was: "How does the light respond choreographically to what's going on onstage? In several moments there are boxes of front light on the chorus when they move from being people in the scene to being an expression of Lily's interior world. It was there that lighting was pushed to a particular level of





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abstraction, feeling otherworldly."

Fortunately, he notes, "The great thing about working with Jim and the rest of the team is there's the latitude to present ideas onstage. We have all our preproduction discussions, but it never really happens with lighting and video until you get into the room." What Doshi discovered was the opera's progression from a kind of triumphalism to darkness. "It's structured so that there's an upbeat sensibility to the first act. Then the doctor begins to experiment on Lily's body, and there's a movement toward bleakness in the lighting. By the time we get to the final sanatorium scenes, it's very angular, very bleak.

"By the time we get to the hospital scene at the end, there's just one front light on the balcony rail, some hidden footlights, and the followspots. I wanted it to look completely exposed and not sentimental. It's as if headlights have been turned on."

Doshi says that working with so many interior locations wasn't the challenge it might seem. "The older I get, the more of a minimalist I become. This is a gross reduction, but I always feel that a good set has the light built in. The dominant gesture for most scenes came through the two side doors. I had a moving light and an [ETC] Lustr in each doorway. The moving light, cutting through the Lustr, created a shape on the floor; it's about modulating those tools in the transition, which is where all the movement is. I have lighting following the axis of the set, moving in and out. But once we are established in the space, it could do different things. For example, in the Countess' party, there are these very narrow shafts of warm light shooting through the doors that people move in and out of, while the principals are downstage center."

He adds, "We can't talk about the lighting without discussing the projection, because Greg and I worked hard to make sure the edge between them wasn't clear. A lighting gesture on one side will be echoed with a graphic idea on

the back of the wall. You don't know where one begins and the other ends. He'll pitch an idea, and I'll say, 'Let me match my color temperature to that.' We dialogue our way through what we need to do to make *mise en scène* look the way we want."

Because the set blocked many of the repertory lighting rig's positions, Doshi works with a relatively small number of angles. "I use some backlight in specific moments. And we have three big movers upstage, doing a diagonal idea, for example, in Lily's mother's kitchen. And we have a backlight system of Lustrs and some overhead crosslight. The great thing about this opera is that it has some big scenes, but most of them are fairly small; you can create an image, put a little soft light on the bodies from the followspots, and it's good to go."

The lighting rig includes 66 ETC Source Fours, 34 Source Four Lustr Series 2 units, ten ETC/High End Systems Halcyon Titaniums, four Halcyon Platinums, four Martin MAC Viper Performances, and five Robert Juliat Super Korrigan followspots. Doshi notes the luxury of five followspots, a rarity in most opera houses. Also used is approximately 120' of RGBWWCW LED tape. Control is provided by an ETC Eos Gio console.

One suspects that Doshi could be speaking for everyone on the creative team when he says, "The important thing is understanding Lily's humanity. It's easy to vilify people's choices when they become icons or part of a group. The complexity of her story is what is impactful about the opera. This is an archetypal story that wraps itself around the story of this woman. I saw at both the final dress and opening how the audience was really leaning in."

Indeed, Lucas, who plays Lily, speaking to *The New York Times*, says that the opera's focus on "human emotions that touch us...that's one of the things that Lily does, is the piece sidesteps advocacy." 🎭