
Orpha Phelan

Selected Reviews

***La Bohème*, Irish National Opera (November 2023)**

For Irish National Opera (INO), in its co-production with Opéra Orchestre National Montpellier, Orpha Phelan, as director, gets all the antics right. She maintains a nice understatement in the good-humoured banter between the poet Rodolfo – the tenor Merūnas Vitulskis – and his three artist flatmates as they make light of their cold, hungry existence and outmanoeuvre their landlord.

Puccini's opera is full of antics and Orpha Phelan gets them all right, from joyous mayhem to emotional darkness."

– **Michael Dungan, The Irish Times** ****

"How to have something new to say in one of the most celebrated operas of all time? This was the challenge facing director Orpha Phelan in Irish National Opera's new production of *La bohème*. By setting the opera in Paris in the 1920s, assembling a stellar cast of singers and with no little help from the realistic sets, costumes and the super responsive orchestra, she succeeded in creating an emotionally-charged, masterful production of this classic tear-jerker. ... Phelan's conception of the work is faithful, yet inventive, stressing both the amusing and tragic elements as they come." – **Andrew Larkin, bachtrack.com** *****

"Phelan takes us not to the 19th century, but rather to the interwar years in the French capital. *La Bohème* sweeps us along on a wave of emotion. Irish National Opera have created a worthy production of Puccini's great work."

– **Alan O'Riordan, Irish Examiner** ****

"In Irish National Opera's production of *La Bohème*, finally taking to the stage in all its spectacular splendour, magic informs every moment of Orpha Phelan's breathtaking direction. ... under Phelan's exceptional direction, even the silence sings. ... A production defined, in no small measure, by Phelan. Opera presents additional challenges to directing for theatre, leaving many directors leaning into staid tableaux and looking out of their depth. What makes INO's *La Bohème* so thrilling is the sweep and richness of movement married to the stirring quality of its singing, both housed in the most gorgeous staging. Phelan's refreshingly exciting compositions a whirlwind of expressive energy that leave you struggling to tear your eyes away to read the surtitles. Even though you know how it all ends, Phelan has you hoping against hope it might yet be otherwise whilst teasing out oft forgotten themes. ... A tragic tale that's an absolute joy, Phelan delivers a tour-de-force."

– **Chris O'Rourke, theartsreview.com** *****

"I want to be immediately up front about this. Irish National Opera's latest production of Puccini's *La Bohème* at the Bord Gáis Energy Theatre should be seen by everybody who has an interest in opera in Ireland. Or maybe, more correctly, those who have not seen any opera at all in Ireland. It is by far the best production of Puccini's masterpiece I have ever witnessed at home, or even on video, film or television. ... As well as being incredibly beautiful visually, it had that real hallmark of a special production – it radiated confidence from start to finish. On an opening night, that is really something special to behold. And, despite such a sad tale, even joyous. ... The production values were immensely impressive and so directly Orpha Phelan and her team deserve credit...This was a night to remember for the full-house audience." – **Dick O'Riordan, Business Post**

"The director Orpha Phelan and designer Nicky Shaw moved the period forward to Paris in the 1920s, another bohemian decade, with considerable success. ... Overall Phelan's production was imaginative and apt." – **Ian Fox, Opera Magazine**

***Don Pasquale*, Irish National Opera (November 2022)**

"Director Orpha Phelan opens a direct channel to laughter by updating the story to the present day" – **Michael Dungan, The Irish Times*******

"Donizetti's comic story of love, cruelty, conceit and age is transported to the modern day in director Orpha Phelan's canny staging, designed by Nicky Shaw." – **Dun Laoghaire, Irish Examiner**

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"Phelan's Successful direction has the audience smiling, laughing & cheering out loud... Phelan's staging displayed a clear vision, overall coherence, attention to detail and a tendency towards bold decision-making. (...) director Orpha Phelan, whose masterful handling of the work ensured that the comedic potential of Angelo Anelli's 1810 libretto, reworked by Giovanni Ruffini and Donizetti for its 1843 Paris premiere, was fully developed. (...) She also directed Wexford Festival Opera's successful presentation of "Lalla-Roukh," which again showed off her talent for comedy to good effect." - **Alan Neilson, Operawire**

"Irish National Opera's Perfect Pasquale... I'm enthralled... Director Orpha Phelan is right on the money with the location of an opera in a space where you can just smell change, pretence, disguise and vanity in the plastic ether... There's a buzz in the theatre all night that never stops..." - **Pat McEvoy, Waterford News & Star**

Lalla-Roukh, Wexford Festival Opera (October 2022)

"Top quality, endlessly entertaining... Triumphant all-singing, all dancing production of Félicien David's forgotten comic opera... Director Orpha Phelan and designer Madeleine Boyd come up with colourful and appealing, eclectic visuals that nod to the Irish origins of the story... a top-quality, endlessly entertaining mix that sends the audience out into the night on an unmistakeable high." - **George Hall, The Stage *******

"Phelan is a storyteller with a gift for comedy, a director with a light touch whose eye for comedic detail extends well beyond main characters. Her work can be full of activity without ever seeming either fussy or too busy."

- **Michael Dervan, The Irish Times**

"Phelan had inventive fun with it and so did we." - **Roy Westbrook, bachtrack.com**

"A forgotten gem... Orpha Phelan has taken down a long-forgotten book from a dusty shelf and found a story which transfixes, taking us into other-worlds – 1860s Paris and fantastic lands – through the prism of today." - **Claire Seymour, Opera Today**

"Director Orpha Phelan opens all the story-books and brings a profusion of fairytale and mythical characters to life, with sorceresses, banshees, the children of Lir, and anyone else you can think of into the chorus line, along with a company of dancers constantly assembling and re-assembling themselves. It is like a premature Christmas treat – part-pantomime, part-ballet, part-opera, Lalla-Roukh is an infectious charming variety show that takes us back to the theatrical entertainments of old."

- **GoldenPlec ******

"[Orpha Phelan] had a visitation from "the mother of invention". Mother invented the narrator device and supplied sundry other strokes of genius." - **Gerald Malone, Reaction**

Raising Icarus, Birmingham Rep (April 2022)

"Each of the leads is crisply defined...The ending, when four of the characters come together as a Greek chorus to reflect on Icarus's fall, is beautifully handled... The performances are all strong..." - **The Guardian**

Blue Electric (Tom Smail), Playground Theatre (October 2020)

"...in the very capable hands of Orpha Phelan who succeeded in ensuring that the 'plot' was always clear, as well as drawing us into the lives of the protagonists" - **John Groves, London Theatre 1**

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Dialogues des Carmélites, Royal Northern College of Music (December 2019)

"The RNCM adopts the worthy policy of engaging professional guests for their creative team. The two-level set of designer Anna Bonomelli worked well and director Orpha Phelan made imaginative use of the space, especially with her simple tableau for the execution scene." - **Anthony Ogus, *Opera Now********

La Cenerentola, Irish National Opera (November 2019)

"Rossini's operatic version has no glass slippers or fairy godmother, but this production, directed by Orpha Phelan, brings together the mix of comedy and tragedy with a light touch, and those early fairy-tale appearances recur to great effect and with youthful involvement." - **David Byers, *The Irish Times********

"The staging and production values here were fabulous and totally irresistible... Rossini had a gift for comic confusion and director Orpha Phelan captured that aspect outstandingly well... overall, a triumph – and an important one for INO."

- **Dick O'Riordan, *The Sunday Business Post***

"Phelan's mischievous, glowing and superbly child-like interpretation of the piece"

- **Emer O'Kelly, *Sunday Independent (Ireland)***

"Orpha Phelan directed an outstanding cast in a beautiful and imaginative staging of the Cinderella story to produce three delightful hours of enthralling entertainment at the Bord Gais Energy Theatre in Dublin... Excellent as the cast were, the wow factor was the staging that drew the audience into a fantasy world of books." - **Cathy Desmond, *The Irish Examiner***

"Orpha Phelan introduces her sturdy directorial concept during the overture: characters from fairy tales come to life... The big choral set pieces are wonderfully shaped by Phelan, with characters from all sorts of fairy tales capering about... This big-hearted show gets the big design it deserves" - **Katy Hayes, *Irish Independent***

"Throughout, stories, storybooks, and storytelling loom large as Phelan crafts some compositionally brilliant scenes, with the assistance of some famous fairytale cameos, fashioning a series of lively, interlinked chapters out of Rossini's exuberant score and Ferretti's humorous libretto. ... Under Phelan's masterful direction, Rossini's vocally demanding opera is sumptuously and vibrantly realised, with Phelan eliciting some outstanding performances from her chorus and soloists... At a time when many famous stories find themselves being politically reimagined, Phelan remains true to Rossini's larger than life tale and allows it to simply tell itself. Making the experience far more entertaining, and politically illuminating, for doing so.... Irish National Opera's "Cinderella/La Cenerentola" is utterly, utterly glorious." - **Chris O'Rourke, *The Arts Review********

"Orpha Phelan's production successfully blends the fairy tale magic with some of the darker elements in the story... Like all good fairy tales, Orpha Phelan's production succeeds brilliantly in bringing out the very dark shadows in this story... Overall, this was a first-rate production" - **Robert Beattie, *Seen and Heard International***

"Director Orpha Phelan's conception of the opera was in general as light-hearted as Rossini intended, though the darker elements of the story were also flagged." - **Andrew Larkin, *Bachtrack***

"...a fine production by Orpha Phelan, in delightful children's-book settings from Nicky Shaw.. Under Phelan's direction the whole cast blended into a really smooth team..." - **Ian Fox, *Opera Magazine***

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***Wuthering Heights*, Opéra National de Lorraine (May 2019)**

"Sometimes we want to dissect shows - know what's wrong, and remember beautiful things. But when you realize that you will have almost nothing negative to say about an almost perfect evening, you put your cynicism in the closet. *Wuthering Heights*, by Bernard Herrmann, on stage at the Opéra National de Lorraine, is of this ilk. To see and hear this production of Orpha Phelan is a total explosion to the heart in a staging that seems like perfection. Orpha Phelan is simply fantastic because she integrates the essence of text, angle and cinematography in authentic theatre and visual magnificence. The impressive set - a mad floor of mountains and sheer cliffs is poetic also; this production praises the inner richness of its characters by connecting them to lighting of breathtaking beauty, on which rests the darker perspective of tomorrow." - **Thibault Vicq, *Opera Online***

"Phelan moved the cast, including a quartet of excellent child actors, around intelligently..." - **Francis Carlin, *Opera Now***

"The French premiere of *Wuthering Heights* at Nancy's Opéra national de Lorraine is in an eye-catching production of Orpha Phelan. In the best Anglo-Saxon theatrical tradition, the work of the director is particularly appreciated in the precision and care of the stage direction of the performers." - **Stefano Nardelli, *Giornale della Musica***

"The production focuses first on a dramaturgical credibility, going so far as to double up the three characters at the beginning of the story with their childish counterparts, skillfully combining memory and realism. In this *Wuthering Heights* of Nancy, the artistic forces are in tune." - **Toutelaculture**

"Outside and interior spaces merge on the stage, where the wooden waves of Madeleine Boyd's decor evoke as much the Yorkshire hills as the floor of some bourgeois living room. In this sober setting, Orpha Phelan directs a show combining an absolute loyalty to the narrative with a great precision in the painting of the characters. The recurring presence of childish doubles of protagonists evokes opportunely their young years." - **Diapason**

"The creative staging by a talented team carries off supremely the climate of wild purity and satanism of Emily Brontë's literary work." - **ConcertoNet**

"In her staging, Orpha Phelan played - and succeeded - the cinematographic map; it's like being in front of a movie in cinemascope and technicolor. Sensitive to the many evocations of nature in the libretto, Phelan imagined a setting dominated by wood, where the limits between the outside and the inside are blurred... all this is supremely charming." - **Crescendo Magazine**

"The Irish director Orpha Phelan and her team imagined a unique production: a giant wavy floor that recalls the curves of the landscape echoing the instability of relationships between characters, nineteenth-century costumes, perfect readability on the stage, elegant play of light, clever use of video: the show exquisitely matches the music. Let's hope that this first French staging will have a sequel." - **Les Echos.fr**

"The production looked after by Orpha Phelan and a young and enthusiastic cast ensured the success of the show." - **Michel Thomé, *Res Musica***

"Orpha Phelan's interpretation, quite literally, has the advantage of aesthetics (including through dreamlike projections on the backdrop)" - **Damien Dutilleul, *Olyrix***

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A Quiet Place, Opera Zuid (November 2018)

"The action on stage illustrates how well Orpha Phelan has listened to and understood the music." - **de Limburger*******

"Orpha Phelan (director) and Madeleine Boyd (set design & costumes) have opted for a unique setting in which a change of place and time is made clear by means of minimal changes. It works wonderfully well - everything is thought through, with sophisticated lighting from Matthew Haskins and beautiful choreography from Lauren Poulton. Exemplary. This Quiet Place is a fantastic production, a performance with a golden edge, giving Opera Zuid a great trump card for a successful tour of Dutch theatres, along with a trip to Luxembourg." - **Place de l'opera *******

"Strong direction from Orpha Phelan." - **de Volkskrant *******

"Orpha Phelan's direction is relevant, inventive, humorous, heartwarming. We already know Opera of The Year." - **Opera Gazet**

"A Quiet Place was powerful precisely because director Orpha Phelan did not refer convulsively to historical or current storylines, which are outside the context of the opera itself. The emphasis of this family drama was in the American suburbs where it belongs." - **nrc.nl *******

"This production is in the hands of the prize-winning duo Orpha Phelan and Madeleine Boyd." - **Chapeau Magazine**

"The director Orpha Phelan opted for a refreshingly no-nonsense approach..." - **Robbert Nachbahr, Opera Magazine**

Fiddler on the Roof, Malmo Opera (September 2017)

"Irish director, Orpha Phelan's finest production at Malmö Opera." - **Martin Lagerholm, Ystads Allehanda**

"Rich, touching and funny ... Do not miss it!" - **Yvonne Erlandsson, Skånskan**

"In view of today's persecution and refugees flowing across borders, this updated version of 'Fiddler on the roof' is hugely politically relevant." - **Ingemar Olander, Blekinge Läns Tidning**

"Timeless drama in a fine setting." - **Martin Lagerholm, Kristianstadsbladet**

"Irish director Orpha Phelan and her artistic team have managed to capture its gripping symbolism. ... Malmö opera has launched the autumn season with a very strong and powerful music." - **Johanna Paulsson, Dagens Nyheter**

Fidelio, Longborough Festival Opera (June 2017)

"A challenging, provocative and highly rewarding evening. ... This is a production that stays with you and makes you think not just about the opera's key themes – about totalitarianism and corruption – but about the future of prisons. This is a director-designer duo whose careers will be fascinating to follow." - **David Lister, The Independent *******

"Phelan has come up with powerful answers" - **Richard Bratby, The Spectator**

"A plucky and lively Fidelio that's filled with light and hope" - **Rupert Christiansen, The Telegraph**

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"imaginative and unsettling" - **Edward Bhesania, *The Stage***

Dead Man Walking, Royal Danish Opera (2017)

"Phelan's hard-hitting production went for the big moments with no holds barred." - **Andrew Mellor, *Opera News***

"Thoroughly well put together...A strong and moving staging by Orpha Phelan, of a strong and moving work. Too much for anyone...but it is great art." - **Søren Kassebeer, *Berlingske* *******

"Staged with great understanding by Irish director, Orpha Phelan." - **Knud Cornelius, *Frederiksborg Amts Avis* *******

"No imperfections in this production of Orpha Phelan's where the staging and design are expansive, yet flexible."
- **Peter Dürrfeld, *Kristeligt Dagblad* *******

"The audience is saved no details. Experiencing this production of *Dead Man Walking* is like watching a film immersed in a large musical aquarium of emotions. Depicted vividly with cinematic accuracy...this is a sharply staged production."
- **Politiken *******

"In Orpha Phelan's direction the story flows clearly. Her staging is solid. ... A brilliant design." - **Carlhåkan Larsén, *HD***

Billy Budd, Opera North (2016)

"Orpha Phelan's attentive, top-notch production brings this tremendous work into focus. The shattered wall is, as we move into extended flashback, hoisted to suggest, ingeniously, a sail...At the end, Billy memorably makes a virtue of simplicity, facing death, on an empty stage, with soaring stoicism." - **Kate Kellaway, *The Observer* ******

"A must-see new production of *Billy Budd* from Opera North, with a spine-tingling chorus and a gripping production. In a production as strong as Orpha Phelan's new staging for Opera North, the formal structure amplifies the emotion, archetypes become living humans, and the emotional effect is overwhelming. A thoughtful, atmospheric and grippingly tense production."
- **Richard Bratby, *The Spectator***

"Opera North's new staging is the work of Irish director, Orpha Phelan, who lets Britten's harrowing opera speak for itself. Phelan tells the story honestly and effectively." - **Hugh Canning, *The Sunday Times***

"Irish director Orpha Phelan takes up the challenge for Opera North, creating a staging of *Billy Budd* that succeeds equally in realising its mystery and transcendence. ... The show is regularly visually striking." - **George Hall, *The Stage* ******

"Clarity and strength are the assets of Orpha Phelan's new production for Opera North: no gimmicks, superb company work and three principals for the battle of good and evil all equal to their dramatic challenges at a level I haven't seen for decades."
- **David Nice, *The Arts Desk***

"Staged with potent skill by Orpha Phelan. The period style is traditional, the story well told. The relationships are very precisely geared by Phelan and entirely believable with no overacting. In fact it's the best-cast performance of the opera I have seen, without a single less than immaculate performance." - **Tom Sutcliffe, *The Critics' Circle***

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"More than merely claustrophobic...the production put the focus on issues of freedom, democracy and attitudes to dictatorship...sullen resentment at its most intense, yet it managed to be fierce and alert." - **Richard Wilcocks, *backtrack* ******

Powder Her Face, Royal Danish Opera (2016)

"A modern classic. Captivating, convincing, virtuosic staging. A delight to the eyes and ears, combined with touches of true horror. ... We laugh at the Duchess but at the same time we feel sorry for her. Her attempt to fill up her life with some meaning and excitement is completely understandable through the brilliant idea of the young silent Duchess."

- **Søren Kassebeer, *Berlingske* *******

"Precise with a perfect balance between the amusing and the tragic. Anne Margrethe Dahl is touching, vulnerable, staggering, worn out.. trying to keep up appearances in her seedy suite...Letting her daughter perform as her younger self is a brilliant idea. In Orpha's direction the opera is as fresh as it was in 1995." - **Thomas Michelsen, *Politiken* *******

"The production at the Takkelloftet is consistently elegant, with role and scene changes taking places on an otherwise static set, the main elements of which are a double bed, a sofa, a bathtub and fixtures for sadomasochistic practices."

- **Gregers Dirckinck-Holmfeld *******

"The roguish and alluring tone of the tango is reminiscent of past times and lets director Orpha Phelan present the Duchess' life over the course of two hours and eight scenes in a light and understandable way, as it flashes in front of her eyes: mostly as comedy, but with the tragedy always present in [her] slow demise." - **Sune Anderberg, *Klassisk* ******

"In The Royal Theatre's production of the opera - which probably should be advertised as "unsuitable for children" - you are not in any doubt about what is happening between the sheets, yet it is by no means vulgar. Probably because the director Orpha Phelan has managed to deliver a production with the same warmth as Adés' music. It is advanced, packed with ideas and manages to constantly surprise." - **Michael Solgaard, *Børsen***

"'Bring me wine, bring me meat' says the naughty Duchess, whose history is now told in a beautiful and intense way at the Royal Opera. Everything is finely tuned by the Irish woman Orpha Phelan, whose productions have been staged three times in Malmö before coming across the water to Denmark. One cannot believe that the opera runs only to 16 April - it is already sold out."

- **Frederiksbog Amts Avis**

"A lot going on, but the clear direction puts thoughts - and appetites - at the tip... Phelan's addition of a young duchess (Christine Dahl Helweg Larsen) is quite marvellous." - **Weekendavisen**

"This is director Orpha Phelan's first mission for the Royal Opera. In Malmö she is known for staging Hoffmann and Jenufa. Here she works with strong contrasts and cool effects, the singers have to act with great force and clear sensuality. The sex scenes are explicit, some border on pornographic, but they serve both the piece's and Phelan's purpose in this morality play... a cutting edge production."

- **Lars-Erik Larsson, *Skånska Dagbladet***

"Phelan's quite brilliant addition of the young duchess..." - **Bettina Nielsen, *Magasinet KBH* *******

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"Orpha Phelan emphasizes the Duchess's tragic inability to understand herself by introducing a younger doppelganger Duchess. So gullible and naive is the Duchess, even advanced in years, we see her troubled, filled with disgust. This is marvelously delivered by Phelan. She leaves the Duchess undressed on stage, covered only by a painting of her younger self. That is masterful!"

- Brian Bo Jensen, *Ars Artis*

***Così fan tutte*, Opera Theatre Company (2013)**

"In cleverly placing the rank tomfoolery involved in parts of Così's plot within the context of Alfonso's status as something of an exotic fairground attraction, Phelan's production manages to be both faithful to the original Mozart-Da Ponte conception, and satisfyingly contemporary in clearly framing the difficult moral and emotional questions we nowadays view the opera as raising."

- Terry Blain, *Opera Britannia*

"An intelligent and sensitive production... Director Orpha Phelan treats the characters almost as archetypes. The sisters are Essex girls, with Fiordiligi (Mairéad Buicke) nearly elegant and Dorabella (Martha Bredin) a vulgarian – a young Hyacinth Bucket, but without moral rectitude. Their genial lovers, Ferrando (Sune Hjerrild) and Guglielmo (Owen Gilhooly) seem at everyone's mercy. Crucially, Don Alfonso (Simon Wilding) is a Victorian magician-cum-ringmaster of magical manipulative power.... The stage direction and Madeleine Boyd's impeccable designs let music work its magic..."

- Martin Adams, *Irish Times*

"Making the figure of Don Alfonso the opera's pivotal character, director Orpha Phelan views him as a man of means bored with life. While da Ponte considered him a philosopher, here he is a travelling conman/fortune-teller entertaining himself by meddling in the affairs of those he befriends. So, his manipulation of the sisters Fiordiligi and Dorabella, their maid-of-all-work Despina and their suitors Ferrando and Guglielmo, becomes a plausible intrigue..."

- Pat O'Kelly, *The Irish Independent*

***Wagner Dream*, The Barbican, London (April 2012)**

"Intelligently and movingly staged by Orpha Phelan." – ***Opera Magazine***

"Orpha Phelan's direction was imaginative, often striking." – **Barry Millington, *The Evening Standard***

***Jenůfa*, Malmö Opera, Arthaus Musik DVD 101665 (2011)**

"...Phelan's Jenůfa is sung with musical and dramatic precision by the kind of tight ensemble not often seen in world class opera. Voice, theatre and orchestra are all of a piece, revealing powerful undercurrents of sexual shame and religious devotion borne out of fear...Orpha Phelan's production looks purposely two dimensional yet remains atmospheric enough that one is never kept at an objective distance. Yet the performance does leave room for the listener to stand back and appreciate how the opera accomplishes what it does, partly because the performance makes its points on details, both psychological and musical... For an unflinching Jenůfa, I'll choose Malmö." – **David Patrick Stearns, *Gramophone***

"Orpha Phelan's production packs a strong emotional punch. Set just after the Second World War, it highlights the bleak existence of the community and the struggle to survive in an unforgiving physical and moral environment. Kostelnicka is no monster but a damaged and flawed woman trying to rationalise her situation. Likewise Jenůfa is not just buffeted by events but strengthens her sense of self worth as the tragedy unfolds. A powerful production which is very well filmed." – **Francis Muzzu, *Opera Now***

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"One can only be grateful for Phelan's enthusiasm for the piece itself and for her dedication to it. The production eminently deserved documentation; it is competitive with any of the other three fine *Jenůfa*s currently on DVD and should be shared with the widest possible audience. What matters most in any *Jenůfa* is whether the *Personenregie* works - and it's superb here."

– **International Record Review**

"Absolutely one of the most complete stagings I've ever seen in an opera." – **Lars-Erik Larsson, *Skanska Dagbladet***

"A perfect staging at Malmö Opera - it is worth traveling over the bridge for a sharp and intense experience with *Jenufa*. Everything about the current staging of Leos Janacek's Czech masterpiece is simple and tight, without exaggerated gestures - and that is why it is so powerful. This March you can experience it at the Deutsche Oper in Berlin where star director Christoph Loy stages this opera. But it's hard to imagine a much more satisfactory production than that which director Orpha Phelan and designer Leslie Travers have created in Malmö." – **Thomas Michelsen, *Politiken. DK***

"A world class *Jenůfa*. The Irish director Orpha Phelan, who last spring gave us her strong *Tales of Hoffmann* in Malmö, together with her set designer Leslie Travers, skillfully uses Malmö Opera's enormous stage to concentrate us on the essentials of the drama. Not to be missed." – **Lenna Bromander, *Aftonbladet Kultur***

***I Capuleti e I Montecchi*, Opera North / Opera Australia (2009)**

"At the Grand in Leeds, Orpha Phelan directs an expectedly hard-hitting and contemporary account of Bellini's *Romeo and Juliet* opera, *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*...[and] takes an audacious theatrical tilt at Bellini....Phelan and her designer, Leslie Travers, boldly update the action to the here and now. The Capulets and Montagues could be rival gangs anywhere — Naples, Chicago, Belfast, St Petersburg — and they are armed to the teeth; and the love story's hinterland of feuding families is transformed into an in-your-face foreground. In the opening scene, a female Montague "sniper" is captured by the Capulets and summarily executed — shockingly, by a gunshot fired by a small boy, egged on by the adults. Initially, this seems gratuitous, but it abruptly establishes the ruthlessness of the milieu in which *Romeo and Giulietta* find themselves — and the corrupting brutality of vendetta. Later, a *Juliet* double (Marie Hallager Andersen) is manhandled and thrown around the stage like a puppet on a string by her own relatives when her tryst with *Romeo* becomes public. On the whole, I find mute-actor alter egos irritating — and a bit of an insult to the artist being "doubled" — but here the image of *Giulietta* dreaming of her own rejection by her family worked potently and disturbingly. I had never imagined that Bellini's opera could be so harrowing. Travers's sets are disarmingly simple, an almost bare stage with a neo-Renaissance parquet floor, which fragments dramatically in Act II, as if caught in a photograph the moment a bomb has exploded underneath it. The symbolism of a fractured world is no less devastating for being obvious...Phelan gets wonderful acting performances from her cast." – **Hugh Canning, *The Sunday Times***

"Played out in a bomb-torn ballroom, with shards of parquet flooring suspended mid-explosion like a Cornelia Parker installation, Orpha Phelan's modern-dress *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* for Opera North makes a strong case for the opera Berlioz described as "disgusting, ridiculous, impotent". While the Capulets train their children to kill using enemy prisoners as their targets, *Giulietta* (Marie Arnet) watches helplessly as her body-double is thrown across the stage like a rag doll. The tone is muted, desperate, caged..." – **Anna Picard, *The Independent***

"...a production that makes engrossing theatre without smudging the music's beauty... The Irish director Orpha Phelan and her designers Leslie Travers and Chris Davey choose an abstract modern-dress setting that is as simple as it is vivid. The cast, led by Sarah Connolly's world-class *Romeo* and Marie Arnet's virginal *Juliet*, create strong personalities that embody Bellini's rapturous music... This *Capuleti* proclaims the many virtues of *bel canto* - and of Opera North." – **Andrew Clark, *Financial Times***

"...Orpha Phelan's imaginative staging, beautifully designed by Leslie Travers.... Phelan is sensible enough to let [*Romeo and Giulietta*] emote without undue distraction..." – **Anthony Holden, *The Observer***

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"Orpha Phelan's new Opera North production of *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* relocates Bellini's take on Romeo and Juliet to an unspecified urban war zone in the late 20th century...Phelan is right to emphasise an aspect of the opera that most directors ignore. Discussions of *I Capuleti* usually focus on its relationship to Shakespeare and the fact that it reworks Romeo and Juliet's sources rather than the play itself. We are incessantly reminded that there is no balcony scene, that Bellini's Lorenzo is a doctor not a priest, and that Tybalt and Paris are conflated into a single figure called Tebaldo. The greatest difference is frequently glossed over, however: where Shakespeare sets drama against the backdrop of an internicine family feud, Bellini positions his

lovers on opposite sides of a senseless, if engulfing civil war. Phelan is determined we should never forget this for a second...Not for the faint-hearted, but highly recommended..." – **Tim Ashley, *The Guardian***

"Irish born director Orpha Phelan has transferred Bellini's version of Romeo and Juliet from medieval Italy to a mid 20th century civil war in an unspecified city. The conflict between the two clans evokes comparison with the sectarian strife in the Balkans or Northern Ireland. The opening scene has the Capuleti hurrying to a council of war, gaining entrance through a door with a spyhole in a bullet-riddled wall. The men lovingly pass around a rifle before awarding it to a child for the privilege of executing a captured sniper. It's not a conventional view of Italy's most lyrical and elegant of bel canto composers yet Phelan and designer Leslie Travers understand that the world Bellini describes is far more macho than in Shakespeare's play... Phelan's concept works well for this highly charged drama... the final scene is of heart touching pathos." – **Clare Colvin, *The Sunday Express***

"If we had thought we were in for a gentle romance that goes horribly wrong, Orpha Phelan's production quickly disabused us. A young lad shot a 'sniper' in the head as the curtain rose... the cold-blooded, modern brutality of Baghdad or Belfast came easily to mind. Leslie Travers's set for Act 2, with dangling wreckage and a shattered chandelier, underlined the internecine strife, as did the bodies of the injured littering the stage as if in the aftermath of a bomb blast.... Phelan managed to weld as international a cast as we have seen into a persuasive team. Most of all, she capitalized on the warlike atmosphere to heighten the tension between the lovers. There was always the feeling, even in their great duet in Act 1, which Connolly and Arnet handled with compelling tenderness, that they were living on borrowed time... Much was made in some quarters of the uniformly sombre costumes. The criticism was surely irrelevant, given the context: military men, let alone terrorists are not known for their loud outfits, nor are opera stages supposed to substitute for art galleries...The chorus was typically forceful. With the serene love scenes and the surrounding violence chillingly contrasted, this was hard-hitting theatre." – **Martin Drever, *Opera***

"We find ourselves in the charred and pockmarked landscape of 20th-century civil war. It seems an unlikely setting for an 1830's opera... but the great achievement of Bellini's score was the way it combined ardent feeling with formal fluency, allowing the opera's tragic action to flow in and out of its beautiful, often melancholy arias. It's this dynamism, approaching naturalism, that Irish director Orpha Phelan's approach suits. Bellini's operas are often presented literally, as costume dramas. Instead Phelan gives us a Juliet so traumatized and assaulted by the vicious shocks of war she never dons the wedding dress her father has ordered for her, dying in grimy petticoat and pantyhose. The production's design palette of charcoal, earth and dried blood is reflected in the vocal colouration of the predominantly male chorus. Its movingly restrained performance is integral to the show's success." – **Sybil Nolan, *The Herald Sun, Australia***

"Orpha Phelan's production is purposefully set in no specific time or place. Drawing on the minimalist tradition of Japanese Noh theatre, the design (Leslie Travers) was strong and stark....with a beautifully oppressive shattered light box as Juliet's chamber. The disparity between the sheer beauty and lyricism of Bellini's music, and the harsh severity of the environment was very effective, emphasising the tragedy of love striving against conflict." – **Olympia Bowman-Derrick, *Australian Stage***

Orpha Phelan

Selected Reviews

"Phelan captures Bellini's original context... though he was a moderniser in his way, Bellini fell foul of the shift towards realism in theatre and a more symphonic conception in music. Phelan juxtaposes the gentle expressiveness of Bellini's lines with grim, dehumanised realism of modern sectarian violence: a young boy (Alexander Keighley) is taught to shoot an enemy woman before he is held hostage, a knife at his throat. The assertive disconnection between music and drama thus embodies the love-and-hate dichotomy at the heart of the Romeo and Juliet story. We have grown to expect that the hate will be portrayed by little more than costumed sword-play, and Phelan's confronting approach was bound to ruffle feathers. For me, the incongruity of setting added an effective edge..." – **Peter McCallum, *The Sydney Morning Herald***