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Stagecraft

OPERA: Artists bring a fresh perspective to 'Nabucco' production

Author: SCOTT CANTRELL



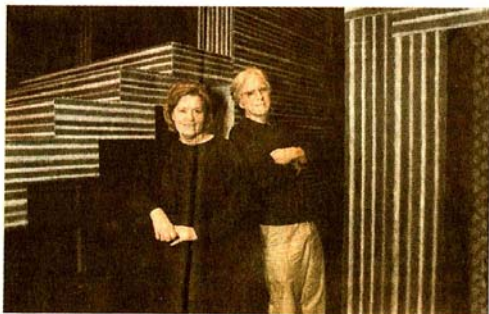
Zeljko Lucic and Anna Shafajinskaia perform in front of the hanging gardens of Babylon set in the Dallas Opera production of Nabucco.

The story is set in Old Testament Jerusalem and Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar is on the Babylonian throne, until he's struck mad by a thunderbolt; the Hebrews are in captivity. There's plenty of intrigue to go around, both political and amorous.

But don't expect Cecil B. DeMille sets and costumes when the curtain rises Friday on the Dallas Opera's new production of Nabucco.

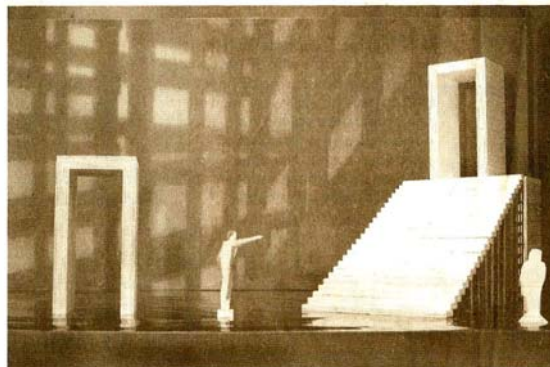
"We approached it without a specific time in mind," says Frances Bagley, who with fellow artist - and husband - Tom Orr designed sets and costumes for the early Verdi work opening the 2006-07 Dallas Opera season. "The garments and sets are just approached as abstract - I actually think the word 'stylized' is better.

"We've definitely got a temple, the river bank, the hanging gardens, but they're stylized versions."



Costume and set designers Frances Bagley and Tom Orr

This is new territory for Ms. Bagley and Mr. Orr, and a relatively rare venture for an opera company. Opera set and costume designs are dominated by a relative handful of specialists. Occasionally an opera company will tap a visual artist or, more rarely, an architect. David Hockney and Robert Wilson have become almost as famous for their opera productions as for their other artistic works. Architect Frank Gehry recently designed a set for a Janáček opera.



Drew Field (above left, at left) and Tom Orr adjust the form of the Idol of Baal, with direction from Frances Bagley. That form, plus a model of the set (above right), come to life on the Fair Park Music Hall stage (below) in the Dallas Opera production of Nabucco.

"We've never done anything like this before," Ms. Bagley says. "It's been an amazing experience that we've been working on for an entire year.

"Both of us have done very large installations, and a lot of public art. So when [Dallas Opera general director] Karen Stone decided she wanted to hire local artists, we came to her attention because our past work has always had a bit of a theatrical quality to it."

Although they've collaborated on some projects, the Dallas-based artists mainly work independently. Parallel lines and grids, sometimes torqued, are a recurrent theme in Mr. Orr's work, draped figures in Ms. Bagley's. Both elements turn up in their Nabucco designs.

The setting for the opera's most famous number, the Hebrew slaves' chorus "Va, pensiero," is a bank of the Euphrates River. Here it's rendered with rows of slender black rods suggesting reeds, in front of a black-and-white-striped backdrop; the interaction lends a striking moiré effect.

The famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon are evoked by a huge photographic enlargement of an abstract squiggle made by draping rubber weather stripping over a hanger.

The production's unifying element is a set of modernist stairways shuffled in various combinations. Set in front of another huge photographic enlargement of a Bagley sculpture made of wood shards, the stairs evoke Solomon's temple.

"It's to suggest conflict," Ms. Bagley says of the fragments. "We've kind of homed in on the emotion of the scenes." "The look is definitely very original," says stage director James Robinson, who's worked with Ms. Bagley and Mr. Orr all through the design process. "It's a very simple story, in many ways, and we're not trying to gunk it up with too much stuff. We want to keep the primary, and primal, qualities.

"We didn't want to get into a weird situation where Abigail is portrayed as Condoleezza Rice and Zaccaria as Saddam Hussein."

Adds Mr. Orr, the quiet member of the creative team: "Let people use their own brains."

Although Mr. Orr and Ms. Bagley have been to a lot of theater, before last fall they had only limited experience with opera.

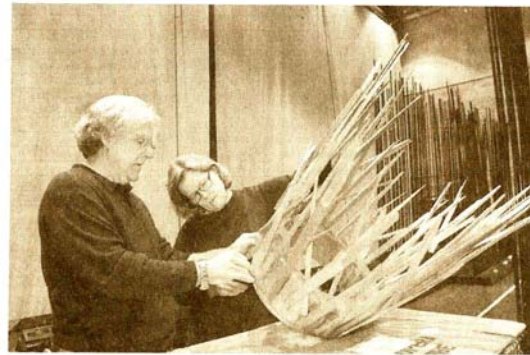
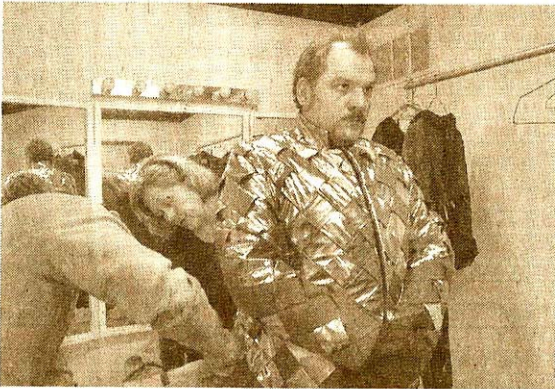
"We actually admitted that to Karen," Ms. Bagley says. "She said, 'That's fine. I think you'll come to it fresh.' Consequently, I think we're now opera buffs."

Ms. Bagley and Mr. Orr credit Dallas Opera technical administrator Drew Field with advising them on the physical possibilities - and impossibilities.

"He has been our right hand," she says. "He coached us, made sure we didn't get into trouble, did all the layouts so things would fit on the stage. The design is really ours, but we've done a whole lot of collaboration."

The Nabucco cast includes Zeljko Lucic in the title role (Nebuchadnezzar), Anna Shafajinskaia as Abigaille, Katharine Goeldner as Fenena, José Luis Duval as Ismaele, Peter Rose as Zaccaria and Mark McCrory as the High Priest of Baal. Dallas Opera music director Graeme Jenkins conducts.

At 7:30 p.m. Friday, Wednesday and Nov. 18, and 2 p.m. Sunday. 214-443-1000, www.dallasopera.org.



Draper-cutter Roy Turpin (left) and Frances Bagley fit baritone Zeljko Lucic (Nebuchadnezzar) for one of his costumes.

Tom Orr and Frances Bagley put finishing touches on the crown of Babylon. Elements of both artists' styles are evident in the design. 5-7.

Photos by NAN COULTER/Special Contributor