

Dream Director

Intensely passionate director finds sex, religion, and politics beneath opera's beautiful skin

After a series of high-profile dud opera productions in the Big Apple (including, alas, the recent clumsy *Les Troyens*) New Yorkers might easily believe opera direction is a lost art. However, thankfully, there is an emerging generation of gifted directors that includes some right-thinking, unreconstructed opera queens who value opera for its intense theatricality. For them, opera is not an expensive kind of a department store Christmas window or a vehicle to use to demonstrate that they took copious notes in their Great Books class in college.

Prominent amongst this new crop of talent is Paul Curran, a director from Great Britain, who recently brought his production of Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to the Pittsburgh Opera to overall acclaim and sold-out houses.

This followed some other high profile successes including Curran's production of Martinu's *Mirandolina* at Wexford that was nominated for the Opera Production of the Year in the Irish Times Theatre Awards, and a highly-regarded production of *Die KönigsKinder* by Humperdinck for the Teatro San Carlo in Naples. Upcoming engagements include more mainstream fare: Mozart's *La Finta Giardiniera* for Garsington, Wagner's *Lohengrin* for

Spoletto, and Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* in Venice.

Curran spoke with Gay City News from Pittsburgh during rehearsals for *Dream*. Even on the phone, his passion for opera cannot be missed.



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Curran's operatic career began with a chance encounter. At age 14, a teacher in his high school—in a place Curran describes as a “rough, rough area in a blue-collar suburb of Glasgow”—took his class to see a performance of Berg's *Wozzeck*. Even

though Berg's opera is a grim, dissonant work, Curran was “enchanted”. He saw no reason not to be.

“We weren't told that it was anything difficult; difficulty was never mentioned. My teachers believed that you didn't patronize kids. If there was a theatrical event, you take them for the whole theatrical event... You take them for the music and the orchestra, the lights and the acting, the costumes and the set, and all of that. As kids, we just accepted that. It didn't seem alien. It was just what it was. I was absolutely entranced by it. I went back to see all the other performances.”

At age 16, however, his parents kicked him out of their home when they found out he was gay and wanted a career in the arts. He hitchhiked to London, met a guy who helped him out (and remains his best friend), and enrolled in a dance school (“Very Billy Elliott, pathetic,” Curran says with a mischievous chortle). To support himself, he worked as an usher at the English National Opera and saw practically every performance from 1981 to 1984, a time during which the ENO put on one acclaimed new production after another.

Curran cherishes that time in his career, “I think it's the greatest apprenticeship that any of us could ever have. It was a way of

learning the repertoire and seeing some glorious performers.”

Still, he pursued a career in dance and it was only after an injury that he went to the National Institute for Dramatic Arts in Sydney to train as an opera director and be with his Australian boyfriend at the time.

During his training and in his subsequent career, he has developed an approach to opera direction that strives to reinforce the emotional impact of a work. As Curran puts it, “As a director, you must guide the eye and you must guide the brain. If being a director is all about taste, then it's about guiding that taste toward the story that you want to tell.”

His approach is intuitive and he brings no particular agenda to his productions; he tries to find a way to tell the story that will enhance the experience for the audience. Curran believes gay men should respond to that directness in his work and the power of opera as an art form: “Opera is the most heightened form of the plastic arts in that it explores the extremities, that is the extremities of emotion, the extremities of feeling, and the extremities of thought. What opera does unlike a play is give you an emotional life, an emotional opinion of the piece, which is the music. And why that affects anybody is that like all great plays



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they are only ever about three things: sex, religion, or politics. I defy anybody to find me to an opera that's not about all three or any one thereof. These are the three things that make society work: sex, religion, and politics. What is more important to gay men than sex, religion, and politics or sexual politics?"

Still Curran worries that some see opera as elitist. "It cannot be elitist. It has to affect everybody. It's all about the human state. It's all about who we are as people. So, I get very

pissed off when snooty patrons start to talk about opera in this very distant and high-falutin fashion. It's just ain't... it's not that hard... it's not fucking brain surgery. It is only an opera."

More than elitism worries Curran. "Indeed a very irritating thing is the whole dumbing down of society which has been taking place over the past 10 years across the board. It's particularly irritating within the gay press, where you'd think that the gay press would

be interested in something that discusses the human condition in such a particular way. I find that opera as an art form is starting to go back to being far too conservative and far too dull. I loathe and detest the prettification of opera and literature so as not to offend the religious right."

Once inspired, Curran's easily continued his eloquent rant.

"Everybody is concerned about butts in

seats and the bottom dollar," Curran says. "I don't understand opera companies... Why bother doing it? What's the point in doing it if they've got nothing to say? If it's just a corporate entertainment—then call it corporate entertainment—don't call it opera. Opera is more than that. Opera has moved me to tears. It has made me angry. It has made me boo, made me scream, and made me shout many times. That is what matters to me and that is what has happened over the 400-year history of opera."

A *Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of the operas that particularly excite Curran. "What I love about *Dream* is how it investigates and strips human desire and emotion in a very sensual and visceral way. The opera goes to a very dark place." His compelling production of the work in Pittsburgh certainly does not shy away from the dark places in the music.

Despite his busy, globe-hopping career, he has a life outside the opera house with his boyfriend, fellow opera director Ken Cazan, who is a noted talent as well. If that may sound like a premise for a very loud sitcom starring Nathan Lane and Jon Lovitz, Curran avows that sharing a passion and career with his boyfriend gives their relationship strength. "We're very supportive of each other. He understands everything that I'm going through. [Our careers] make you realize that to make a relationship work, it's as hard as putting on a show."

It was only 10 years ago that Curran graduated from NIDA. At that time, he promised himself that he would do his best to create a freelance career directing opera internationally within the decade, and he has done just that. May his career take him to New York, soon. The opera companies here could certainly use him.