MUSICAL EVENTS

THE DISSONANT HOWL OF "SALOME"

Two New York productions of Strauss's opera reposition its necrophiliac protagonist as a perverse instrument of justice.

By Alex Ross

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At the Met, decadence is indicated by ersatz-paganistic goings on in the background, inspired, in part, by Stanley Kubrick's "Eyes Wide Shut." Illustration by André Derainne

The Biblical figure of Salome, Princess of Judea, who dances before Herod Antipas and demands the head of John the Baptist as a reward, infiltrated late-nineteenth-century culture as an agent of extreme decadence—"the goddess of immortal Hysteria," as the novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans called her. In Oscar Wilde's play "Salomé," written in French in 1892, the princess goes so far as to kiss the prophet's lifeless lips. In 1905, Richard Strauss used Wilde's play as the basis for his opera "Salome," which titillated audiences all over Europe and horrified the board of the Metropolitan Opera. To a degree, the character exemplifies the misogynistic fin-de-siècle trope of women as vampiric beasts. Yet Wilde's implicit identification with Salome complicates matters. Hedwig Lachmann, the German poet whose incisive translation of "Salomé" became the libretto for Strauss's opera, saw the princess as an "ethereal being" who feels "alienated from the raw corruption of her surroundings." The true villain is Herod, who, in his hypocritical mixture of slobbering lust and grandstanding moralism, is a model man of power.

The voluptuous violence of Strauss's score adds to the richness of the conception. At the turn of the last century, Strauss was experimenting with unprecedented levels of dissonance, and the grinding harmonies of "Salome" threaten to undermine the tonal system, as the young Arnold Schoenberg did not fail to notice. When Herod enters, the music lurches between saccharine waltz episodes and spasms of Expressionistic anarchy—a fracturing of the lingua franca. Salome, in the grisly final scene, reasserts a degree of tonal stability, but dissonant uproar resumes when Herod commands her death. The curtain has gone up on twentieth-century chaos.

New York audiences have witnessed two radically divergent views of "Salome" this season. The Met has marshalled its lavish resources to present its first new staging of the work since 2004: hulking sets, images of artful horror, Wagnerian

voices, a monster orchestra unleashing a storm of sound. In February, Heartbeat Opera, spending a fraction of the Met's budget, offered a riveting version of "Salome" on a chamber scale, using an arrangement for eight clarinettists and two percussionists which the composer Dan Schlosberg had devised for the occasion. Both productions succeeded in repositioning Salome as a perverse instrument of justice. She pushes Herod's social order to its logical extreme, the point at which it is consumed by its own malignancy.

Claus Guth, who directed "Salome" at the Met, shows sympathy for the princess from the outset. Before the opera begins, we see a neglected girl playing with a doll and then throwing it to the ground. Six girls of various ages shadow Salome throughout the production, evoking a horrific childhood. They make especially unsettling appearances in a concrete-panelled dungeon below the palace, where John the Baptist, or Jochanaan, is a prisoner. Flashes of menace accumulate until, amid the orchestral melee that introduces Salome's final monologue, we see not only Jochanaan's severed head but also his decapitated corpse. The young Salomes stand around in a daze: it is implied that Herod abused them in the same space. Given that Herod considers Jochanaan a man of God, the beheading of the prophet seems, if not justified, understandable. Whatever is deemed holy in such a place bears responsibility.

If Guth had found a comparably vivid aesthetic for the palace itself, he might have had a classic production on his hands. Alas, Herod's world is numbingly dreary, at odds with the nasty glitter of the score. The setting is Victorian, but as if covered in ash. Decadence is indicated by ersatz-paganistic goings on in the background: men wearing ram's heads, a naked maiden, spectral servants. In interviews, Guth has named Stanley Kubrick's "Eyes Wide Shut" as an inspiration—a regrettable choice, given the feebleness of the equivalent scenes in the film. High-end grotesqueries out of Fellini or Visconti would have been more apt.

The South African soprano Elza van den Heever brings formidable acting abilities to the title role, handily conveying Salome's layers of trauma and her

damaged core. In the Dance of the Seven Veils, the singer remains clothed, directing the younger Salomes in a series of pantomimes that hint at what she has endured. Vocally, van den Heever falls short of the comprehensive mastery shown by Karita Mattila in the Met's previous production. On opening night, the soprano's top notes blazed out with a cool gleam, but her lower and middle registers lacked the heft needed to punch through Strauss's dense textures. Peter Mattei, as Jochanaan, had no such problem, singing with sustained strength and beauty of tone. At times, though, I wanted more emphasis on the deranged energy of the prophet's visions. Gerhard Siegel, a veteran Herod, navigated the king's tongue-twisting harangues with ease, yet he resorted to the kind of barking-and-rasping caricature that is all too familiar in "Salome" stagings. Michelle DeYoung was a somewhat stolid Herodias, Piotr Buszewski a fiercely ardent Narraboth.

Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the Met's chronically overscheduled music director, seems to lack the rehearsal time to establish distinct stylistic profiles for the operas he conducts. He plowed through "Salome" with the same plush, effusive manner he brings to Wagner or Puccini: the score's ragged edges were blunted, its whiplash contrasts blurred. Seven seasons into his tenure at the Met, Nézet-Séguin has yet to make much of a mark. There is something faceless about his music-making; everything sounds reasonably good, but nothing sticks in the mind.

I have no idea what sort of late-night brainstorming session prompted the leaders of Heartbeat Opera to transcribe "Salome" for an ensemble dominated by clarinets, with saxophones and recorders thrown into the mix. But I imagine that the creative team was looking at the first page of the score, on which a clarinet plays a slithering bitonal scale and then a dancing figure in C-sharp minor. Why not stick with that instrument to the end? The lustrous weirdness of Strauss's music survives the experiment intact; at times, it is heightened. One masterstroke of Schlosberg's arrangement is to assign the low, groaning chords that accompany Salome's line "Ah! I have kissed your mouth, Jochanaan" to soprano recorders, which emit a maximally eerie hoot.

The show took place at Irondale, in Brooklyn. Elizabeth Dinkova, the director, moved the action to the present day, with flickering screens suggesting the surveillance apparatus of a paranoid regime. The singers used an English translation of the Lachmann text, by Tom Hammond. In an intriguing revision, the Heartbeat team expanded the role of the Page, who is besotted with the Syrian captain Narraboth, who is in turn besotted with Salome. When Narraboth kills himself in despair, Wilde has the Page deliver a sweet little eulogy for him. Strauss cut that passage, but Schlosberg wove a couple of lines from it—"He was like a brother to me, closer than a brother"—into the interlude that precedes Herod's entrance. The mezzo-soprano Melina Jaharis found an oasis of pathos in that moment, although the decision to present the character as female meant that the gay subtext fell by the wayside.

The Heartbeat cast, liberated from the need to bellow over Straussian mayhem, offered an unnervingly intimate perspective on the opera's cauldron of kink. Summer Hassan was a convincingly girlish Salome, her crisp, poised delivery mirroring Lachmann's view of the character as a disturbed innocent. Patrick Cook found in Herod the strain of queasy lyricism that Siegel missed at the Met. Nathaniel Sullivan embodied a sinewy Jochanaan who is sorely tempted by Salome's advances. Jacob Ashworth conducted with authority. I wasn't persuaded by Dinkova's ending, in which the Page shoots the principals and then departs. Guth landed on a more haunting and ambiguous image: Salome walking into a luminous mist, leaving mad reality behind. ♦

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