

ARIADNE

AUF NAXOS

NEIL ARMFIELD, STAGE DIRECTOR OF BLO'S *ARIADNE AUF NAXOS*, IN CONVERSATION WITH SIMON REES, DRAMATURG, WELSH NATIONAL OPERA

FROM SHADOW INTO LIGHT

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Simon Rees: How did you first approach *Ariadne auf Naxos*, with its complex structure of comedy clashing with tragedy, the back-stage world with the world on stage?

Neil Armfield: It's taken me a long time to get to love *Ariadne auf Naxos*, although it has always struck me as a work with incredibly beautiful passages. I've only ever seen it once on stage, and nobody I'd spoken to who'd seen a production of it could remember what it was about. Our job has been to highlight the two absolute dramaturgical realities, and to play to the hilt the realism of the backstage world, making it into a recognisable backstage of an actual theatre. We decided that if the wealthy householder puts on performances like this, he must have a well-equipped private theatre. This means that the power structures which Strauss and Hofmannsthal show are placed in a context in which we can instantly read the geography of the space. We're deliberately playing with an internal joke in the piece: in the Prologue, Strauss makes the strutting opera-seria performers behave more like clowns than the clowns themselves. We are reinforcing this with costumes, so that whenever we see the prima donna, the tenor or the three nymphs there are Kleenex tissues forming clown ruffs around their necks, their hair is strangely pinned up with stocking caps, and they're in make-up bases and in pyjama-like garments hiding their costumes, so their transformation into serious performers is much greater. While these people behave like hysterical fools, the commedia group looks much more like the man in the street, and take a much more realistic, sensible approach to the issue of the combination of theatrical styles which is forced on them.

SR: Is this reflected in the set as well as in the costumes?

NA: When I began to be clear about the contradictions and contrasts within the work, I wanted to push them as far as possible so that there's no uncertainty about which world we're in. In contrast to the backstage confusions, the production of the opera is as beautiful as it is within our means to create. [WNO set designer] Dale Ferguson and I abandoned a design we had been working on for some months, simply because the *Ariadne* opera was not supported in a space that was sensuously glowing with light, as we felt the island needed to be. So we started again and worked backwards from the production of the opera, and ended up with something more satisfying and vivid as a way of telling the story.

SR: Does it look like a real Greek island?

NA: It's nothing like a real Greek island. I'm imagining this as if it were a production of *Ariadne auf Naxos* directed by Pina Bausch, as if one of the most exquisite and spiritual of directors finds a

modern style, but an approach in which the classicism is able to sit comfortably. It isn't a way to update the opera. Making the frame of the opera contemporary was crucial to the comedy of the backstage life and the recognisability of the conventions that are being played with.

SR: What are the difficulties with the commedia convention?

NA: One of the most difficult things to achieve is that the comedy group have to be genuinely funny. There is a well-worn fallacy in opera that because something is meant to be funny and because it sounds funny then it is going to be funny. You sit there in the audience with a fixed grin, understanding what they're attempting, but not experiencing it. In rehearsal we [developed] something that comes from [WNO cast members] D'arcy Bleiker, Wynne Evans, Andrew Mackenzie Wicks and Tim Mirfin. We have to work with the performers to find out what their clowns are, and what the originality of play might be between them. Fortunately [they were] a pretty fearless bunch. The atmosphere of rehearsal is crucial in terms of making a space in which people can breathe, and comfortably play together.

SR: How lively an art form is the commedia these days?

NA: Unfortunately commedia is one of those things which has the ring of the museum about it. There's nothing less funny than a bunch of people doing commedia for the sake of commedia. Commedia is individual clowning based on character, and the character comes from the personality of the performer, in combination with the behavioural needs of the character. It emerges from the mixture of the personality and the physical type of the performer. Unless you get performers who are comfortable to play from themselves, rather than from the notion of character, you'll never create comedy. *Fawlty Towers* is an excellent example of commedia dell'arte, though it never calls itself that. Here you have the foolish master, the idiot servant, the cunning maid, the overbearing wife, the braggadocio captain and so many other commedia characters, and the comedy always emerges from the character, not the situation.

SR: Does the fact that it is in an opera make it easier or harder?

NA: Commedia is ten times as hard when set in the relatively rigid framework of a musical score, as it is in *Ariadne*. No, a thousand times harder. You have to make the timing natural to the music. It's something you can only find in rehearsal. You can't decide it in advance. The only way to build something organically is for us all to discover it and to develop it simultaneously. It means going in with a sense of what it might be, but with no specific sense of where it's going to arrive, so it is a blind leap of faith. Within the opera the commedia makes up more than a quarter of the length of the whole evening. It has to be good, and it has to lead us somewhere. The value of the prologue in particular is that it is a marvellous situation in that we have a composer who is almost parodically highly serious (of course Strauss is parodying himself) set against a whole set of extremely practical clowns, who are jobbing actors, and whose essential message is – 'It's only a show, it just doesn't matter, it isn't worth getting worked up about'. This presents the contradiction to the composer singing so beautifully, lovingly and spiritually about the power of music. Both realities are true and coexistent.

SR: Is this paradox something you have explored before?

NA: One of my most stabilising thoughts, throughout the 24 years of my career as a director, has been to carry the paradoxical notion that the work you are doing is the fullest, the most generous, the finest thing that you are capable of doing, with the contradictory understanding that it's only a show, and that finally it doesn't matter. Even though it has to matter deeply, you have to keep a practical sense that the world is the world, and, finally, family is probably more important. Both things have to be true. In *Ariadne auf Naxos* I love the fact that it is such a working-out of a dual reality, in which the practical world of the comedy is enriched by its witnessing of the potential depth of expression and beauty that is achievable in the world beyond its own fence.

SR: Does this enrichment go both ways?

NA: At the same time as the comedians are enriched by the opera-singers, the operatic world with its notion of higher art is brought down to earth in lovely delicate bumps by the contact made with the clowns. It's the same comic idea you see in a Marx Brothers film where Groucho, Chico and Harpo

are suddenly put next to Margaret Dumont, who is dealing with a highly serious situation or a piano recital, and they cope in their way with the comedy of this extraordinary creature. Our laughter never takes us higher than the comedy of that collision. At the same time as enjoying the comedy, we are drawn towards the point of transformation, which is one of the things I love most about the theatre. In my production of *Billy Budd*, for instance, the cast explored this during the prologue, when they appear on stage as performers, not as characters. By stepping from shadow into light, the miracle of theatre transforms the performer from being a person with problems and confusions to being a character, a pure and readable instrument of story-telling.

SR: You've said that this affects the opera singers in *Ariadne* too.

NA: I think the least of the problems of the piece is the transformation of the characters who have been idiotic prima donnas in the prologue into characters of high seriousness in the opera. The commedia characters lead us into it, by showing a fascination with the power of theatre, and the generosity that artists have for each other. We have a sense of artists coming together and being genuinely respectful of each other. The commedia characters are so touchingly moved by the extremity of Ariadne's pain, and by the beauty of her singing, that they try and do everything they can to come in at her level. The beautiful first song of Harlequin to Ariadne is the improvisation of a great artist trying out the idiom of the art-form he has stepped into to lend support. But as that support is resisted, the comedy level goes down and down. It's all an attempt to save the show, in the great tradition of 'the show must go on.' The combinations of commedia and opera are life-enhancing and wonderfully uplifting.

SR: So what for you is the key to the work?

NA: For me the key is that underneath Ariadne's dilemma is the idea that it's better to be alive than dead. Even though she thinks she'd dying, and embracing death right up to the end, she is in fact having something like the first post-adolescent sexual experience, an experience which is led through love into finding a deep sensual, spiritual and psychological connection with a human being. Through the combination of two people something new is born. That's what the work is about, and that's what Zerbinetta is singing about. *Ariadne auf Naxos* is full of so many wonderful paradoxes and turnings-in on itself, full of ironic reflections and echoes. When I was puzzling about what is this piece about, and how to find a connection with it, I had a long conversation with [WNO's General Director at the time] Anthony Freud. I was wandering around a park in Leichhardt with a mobile phone, searching for the answers, and Anthony said 'Have a close listen to Zerbinetta's aria in the prologue'. What is revealed in that aria, and how it informs how we listen to Zerbinetta talking about the confusions of sexuality in the opera, gives the emotional dimension of the whole work. When you realise that this piece of comedy is being performed by a person who has her own deep well of pain and understanding, it shows you how Strauss and Hofmannsthal created their complex view of humanity up there on the stage, through layers of contradiction.