



The Dance of the Dead Rhino: William Kentridge's Magic Flute

by Serena Guarracino

In the face of its ever-announced death – whether hailed or mourned – the theatrical genre known as opera shows a stubborn vitality, and a puzzling ability to embrace topicality together with the archaeological preservation of its repertoire. William Kentridge's *Magic Flute*, which includes but is not limited to 'yet another' staging of Mozart's opera, is an example on the survival of opera in contemporary performance practices. In his long and complex work on the *Flute* (2003 to the present day), the artist uses opera to articulate his discontent against the Western white culture at the roots of colonial violence (including, but not limited to, apartheid), a culture that nonetheless he cannot discard altogether.

Kentridge's works counterpoint the confrontation of light against darkness, which in the opera embodies the triumph of Enlightenment values over chaos, with themes closer to the artist's own location as a white South African, such as the problem of mourning in the face of colonial violence. This the artist accomplishes by introducing into the opera a new, dumb character, a white African rhino featuring both in the staging and in further artwork related to the opera. Displacing onto the rhino the death usually reserved by opera to its female protagonists (a narrative device borrowed from later operatic narratives), Kentridge offers an alternative representation of the subaltern subject as the one who cannot speak or sing – yet can dance.¹ The multiple incarnations of the rhino haunt Kentridge's *Magic Flute* with unspeakable memories of past violence that taint the opera's outwardly optimistic narrative. In this way, the artist conjugates opera in the present tense, contaminating its music with the silenced voices of colonial history.

¹ The question whether the subaltern subject can speak has been notoriously asked by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988); I have elsewhere elaborated on opera's ability to give voice to the subaltern subject.



OPERA IS DEAD; LONG LIVE OPERA!

Opera has been a dead genre for almost a century now. While the question of what contemporary opera really is about remains too broad and complex to be analysed here, it is generally held that the opera genre as it was known in its heyday – the time of Verdi, Wagner, and Puccini – is, in Mladen Dolar's words, "emphatically finished" (Žižek and Dolar 2002: 2). After the early twentieth century (after Puccini and Richard Strauss) opera lost its role as a popular form of entertainment whose multifarious audiences cut across social classes, languages and peoples. Consequently, it has slowly become a weird sort of entertainment for the wealthy bourgeoisie and a restricted intellectual elite, who eccentrically prefer its flamboyant style to the more Apollonian mode of instrumental music. Yet opera survives as part and parcel of the classical Western musical repertoire, where the word 'classic' resonates of the themes of death and survival. South-African writer J. M. Coetzee, writing incidentally about maybe the most classical of classics (though no opera composer) J. S. Bach, argues that "the classic defines itself by surviving" (2001: 19). This survival is not due to some inherent quality of the work of art, but to the impossibility of people to let go of it; the classic stands the test of time by being subjected to unremitting, even hostile interrogation, to the continuous threat of death and oblivion.

For opera, in Coetzee's terms, interrogation means the questioning of the gender and racial stereotypes it perpetuates: it means exposing opera's complicity in the creation of an imagery supporting Western supremacy over the rest of the world, part of what Edward Said has notoriously termed "orientalism". Mozart's *Magic Flute* plays an important and yet delicate role in this tradition: performed for the first time in 1791 (the year of the composer's death), the opera predates most of the operatic repertoire that Said, in his well-known essay on Verdi's *Aida* (1871), has identified as an instrument of knowledge of imperial Europe over a discursively constructed "Orient" (1993: 115-132). Mozart's opera shares with *Aida* its setting, an Ancient Egypt that works both as exotic location and as a fantasized source of esoteric knowledge for the Masonic ideals the composer notoriously encoded in the *Flute*: for Mozart and his contemporaries, the Egyptian setting provides a place to safely reflect on European issues of the time such as good government and the status of the bourgeois family within a changing society. As a consequence, in contrast with *Aida*'s Egyptologist accuracy in stage design and costumes, *Magic Flute* stagings have never aspired to give a 'truthful' Egyptian spectacle to their public.

Yet, both operas partake to the ongoing construction of an European fantasy of Egypt, as Said remarks elsewhere: "Mozart's masonic fantasies about Egyptian rites in *The Magic Flute* [...] were no more inaccurate than the disquisitions of all the philologists and scholars who pronounced on the secrets of Egypt's past" (2001: 155). In particular, the stage history of Mozart's opera has been grounded in neo-classicism since Karl Friedrich Schinkel's 1819 scenery, which reproduced the newly built centre of the Berlin hosting the production. This has resulted in a tradition, which lasts to this



day, where neo-classicism has unevenly come together with a rising Egyptomania elaborating, as Steinberg notes, the relation between East and West in visual as well as in aural terms. Not being designed as a strictly 'Orientalist' opera in its original conception, the *Flute* has ended up as one, where "the 'Oriental' supplies the visualized unconscious for the conceited West. There is no way out of this problem with *Die Zauberflöte*" (Steinberg 2005: 55-6).

Actually, there is no way out of this problem with opera in the overall. From the *Flute* to *Aida*, through such staple material of opera theatres such as *Carmen* and *Madama Butterfly*, the genre is thoroughly compromised with Western ideology in its most tainted aspects, such as misogyny, orientalism, and even outright racism. Recent scholarship on the genre has exposed its relish in patriarchal violence (see esp. Clément 1989) as well as in the objectification of the subaltern subject, the Oriental 'other' put on display for Western eyes and ears.² With its ideological grounds under close scrutiny, one would think that opera could easily, as Dolar has it, "be assigned a neat place in cultural archaeology and thus properly buried" (Žižek and Dolar 2002: 3).

Yet, Dolar adds, "the astounding thing is the enormous operatic institution's stubborn, zombielike existence after its demise; it not only is kept alive but is also growing steadily. [...] The more opera is dead, the more it flourishes" (ibid.: 3). Just to mention a few examples, in the midst of the credit crunch the Australian government has recently announced a \$152 million funding for the refurbishment of the Sydney Opera House; while US companies are trying to survive the economical crisis by moving to smaller venues and gathering funding for the staging of new operas. This is not the place to investigate the ideological background of these policies: both cases are here reported to exemplify the same phenomenon, i.e. opera's survival in the face of its repeatedly announced death. As its heroines, who die repeatedly only to live again in yet another staging, opera too excels in the art of survival, of confronting death in order to repeatedly overcome it.

Actually, opera's struggle with death and oblivion is ingrained in the very history of the genre. As Slavoj Žižek notes, "from its very beginning, opera was dead, a stillborn child of musical art" (Žižek and Dolar 2002: viii). Works such as the *Flute* or *Aida* may have been devised to bring back, in different ways, a dead civilization from Ancient Egypt; opera, in the first experimental staging taking place in sixteenth-century Florence, was designed to bring back to life another dead art form, ancient Greek theatre, which, according to studies from the time, was considered to have been performed with musical accompaniment throughout (see Sternfeld 1993: 31). The first opera stages this reviving of a dead art form through the story of Orpheus, which

² The representation of ethnic difference has only recently become topical in opera criticism: after Said's already mentioned work of *Aida* this opera has attracted most scholarship on the matter; seminal work on this topic on a wider variety of operas can be found in the miscellany *The Work of Opera* (Dellamora and Fischlin 1997).



became a staple in operatic history: from the *Euridice* by Peri, the first whose score has been preserved (1600) to Monteverdi's 1607 *Orfeo* and Gluck's 1792 *Orfeo e Euridice*, the story of the artist who tries to bring his beloved back from the dead through the power of music resurfaces regularly in opera history to witness the genre's constant confrontation with death.

Interestingly enough, as Dolar notes, both Peri and Gluck bend the story to conventions of the time by granting it an unexpected happy ending, while Monteverdi sticks to the original myth in rewarding Orpheus' descent to hell not with Eurydice's return but with immortality for him and his art (Žižek and Dolar 2002: 13). In this sense Monteverdi's version can be considered "the basic paradigm of opera" (ibid.: 10), not only because, as Dolar argues, it foregrounds music's ambiguous power between the religious and the erotic, but especially, I would add, because it both foregrounds and represses its symbolic centre, the dead body of Eurydice. Opera as a genre was devised to defy death, and death was immediately displaced over the body of an/other, a woman which could be either saved or irretrievably lost, but was still the *locus* where the boundary between the dead and the living was inscribed.

The dead female body as signifier of cultural stability finds a far wider currency than opera narratives. As Elizabeth Bronfen has notoriously argued, "over her dead body a clear boundary between self and Other, as this implies the primary distinction between living and dead, can be reaffirmed" (1992: 192). Opera offers a privileged place for the elaboration of this dynamics, as its spectacle almost invariably stages the death of a female character. Although this paradigm finds its perfected embodiment in nineteenth-century romantic heroines, it is foreshadowed by early operatic characters such as Monteverdi's Arianna, whose death lament – "*Lasciatemi morir*" – represents the first instance of the uncanny power of the opera diva: "she is the first in the great series of distraught divas who will rule operatic history – Diva, the goddess of the opera whose status depends on being in total despair, the goddess deprived of all power and hence the most powerful" (Žižek and Dolar 2002: 15).

A CEREMONY OF MOURNING

Respectful of operatic conventions of the time and of Greek mythology, Monteverdi's Arianna does not die at the end of the opera; nor die the two primadonnas featured in Mozart's *Magic Flute*, the Queen of the Night and her daughter Pamina. The first will be defeated by the good mage Sarastro, while the second will eventually be united to prince Tamino thanks to the eponymous flute. The flute, heir to Orpheus' lyre, is an embodiment of reason which helps Tamino overcome all obstacles and achieve literal as well as intellectual enlightenment. At the start of the opera, Tamino is recruited by the Queen of the Night to rescue Pamina from Sarastro, described as a cruel despot who has kidnapped her daughter. Only when he arrives at the Temple of the Sun will the main character discover that Sarastro is actually a just and enlightened ruler while the Queen is an obscurantist tyrant starving for power. In his ability to choose between good and bad rule resides Tamino's function as role-



model for the new man: as Subotnik argues, “by Enlightenment standards, Tamino, the man of reason, is the man of ultimate worth” (1991: 138).

Through Tamino’s and Pamina’s story *The Magic Flute* represents the moment of passage from an opera for aristocracy to the bourgeois opera of the nineteenth century; as such it brings together “the logic of mercy and the logic of autonomy [...] the triumph of the revolution and the form of the old sovereignty” (Žižek e Dolar 2002: 85). Hence the heroine does not die, nor does a *deus ex machina* rescue her, as happens to Eurydice in Peri’s opera; on the contrary, she and Tamino share a *bildung* that will allow them, blessed by Sarastro, to create the couple, the bourgeois foundational myth. It is only in the nineteenth century that operatic embodiments of normative sociality and sexuality will require the death of the heroine. In this context, the disturbing, powerful element of a diva such as the Queen of the Night cannot just be ‘vanquished’ without any further ado; representing deviance from the patriarchal norm, she must be publicly executed on stage, so that the endangered order can find new stability over her dead body. As Adriana Cavarero writes, these women, “as women who live outside familiar roles, as transgressive figures who are often quite capable of independence, they do not just die – they must die so that everything goes back to normal” (2005: 125).

Kentridge appropriates the opposed significations opera history inscribes on the diva’s body: both the power of her voice and her vulnerability to violence and death feature prominently in the *Flute*, where they are bent and displaced to serve multiple discourses. Through the rhino, a liminal character introduced by the visual counterpoint to Mozart’s narrative, Kentridge embraces the positive, conciliatory ethics of baroque opera while taking into account the tragic ending of the woman character in nineteenth-century opera by displacing it onto a character which does not partake of the vocal power of the opera diva. This movement happens across the many forms Kentridge’s work on the *Flute* inhabits.³ The visual theme dominating his works consists in white-on-black animations created through the negative image of drawings in black charcoal on white paper. Both visual references, blackboard drawing and the camera, translate the aural language of the opera and its dialogue between light and darkness. Yet they also translate the opera into a different set of references: as the artist writes in his notes on the production, “the metaphor and image of the camera point outwards to decisions about staging and costume. We would have to move from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century” (2007: 64). It follows that Mozart’s opera is suddenly displaced to an unspecified location in the African continent during the golden age of European empires.

³ Kentridge’s work on the *Flute* includes the staging of the opera together with many drawings, aquatint and drypoint, and two installations, *Preparing the Flute* (2005) and *Black Box/Chambre Noire* (2006), both consisting in a model theatre where animations from the *Flute* are integrated in a choreography of computer-operated wooden puppets on the soundtrack of themes from the opera, reworked and integrated with original music.



The camera and the blackboard both resonate of the themes of power relations and colonial history. The camera was a pivotal instrument of imperial power, used to appropriate the 'virgin lands' and all they included, from landscape to humans and animals; on the other hand, the blackboard is the teacher's instrument and characterizes magician and mentor Sarastro. Yet, as Kentridge notes, "post-Enlightenment thinking has made us wary of philosopher autocrats. The enforced imparting of their wisdom has had unintended but calamitous consequences throughout history, [...] all through the colonial era, and into our own centuries" (ibid.: 58). Moved forward in colonial times, Sarastro cannot remain the trustworthy, illuminated sage Mozart portrayed through a diatonic, simple and manly style, in stark contrast with the highly embellished minor mode characterized Queen of the Night.

Kentridge engages with the two main divas featured in the opera, the Queen and Pamina, as marginal yet privileged (or privileged *because* marginal) spaces of utterance. Yet, this engagement does not resolve in a binary dialectic where one term ends up substituting for another (the female for the male, the subaltern for the hegemonic). On the contrary, their voices are put into dialogue with the rhino's silence, a silence that, according to the well-known definition by Trinh T. Minh-ha, can be said to "resonate[...] differently", to work as "a 'soundless' space of resonance, and a language of its own" (Trinh 1996: 8). Differently resonates the deafening silence of the rhino from Robert Schumann's film *Rhinoceros Hunting in German East Africa* (1910-11) superimposed by Kentridge to scene 12, act II of the *Flute*: as the sage magician Sarastro sings "within these hallowed walls,/ Where human loves the human,/ No traitor can lurk,/ Because one forgives the enemy" (Schikaneder 1956: 39), the clip reels in the background, showing two early twentieth-century hunters chase and kill a twin-horned African White rhino and in the end pose for the camera with its carcass.⁴

The addressee of Sarastro's aria, which extols an ethic of forgiveness in the face of wrong and violence, is Pamina, who has just escaped rape by the Moor Monostatos; here the diva stays silent throughout the whole aria, Sarastro's hand firmly on her shoulder. Kentridge comments: "how long and how firmly should this hand be on her shoulder? The shift from the hand being reassuring to its being predatory is a matter of a second, or the slightest resistance from Pamina's shoulder" (2007: 76). The background reel highlights the potential for violence in this scene, swinging dangerously between protection and coercion; its meaning spills over as the animal, transformed from ghostly projection to animated drawing, reappears elsewhere in the opera staging. Kate McCrickard notes how the rhino is tamed by Tamino in act I:

⁴ Here and afterwards, I will be referring the rhino by the neuter pronoun, although there would be grounds for the use of the feminine: together with the rhino performing the role of sacrificial victim common to many women characters in opera, Kate McCrickard mentions a female Indian rhino named Clara, who toured Europe around 1741, as a possible reference to Kentridge's use of the rhino motif (2007: 150).



the projected animation dances to the flute, even managing a handstand, before he is hoisted up off the stage. The artist's lyrical draughtsmanship and animation of the rhino – who has jointed limbs like a pin puppet – makes the huge beast appear elegant and somewhat fragile (2007: 150).

The scene from act II featuring the death of the rhino also recurs in *Black box/Chambre noire*, which explores outside the strictures of opera plot and theatre devices the research the artist conducted on German colonialism in Africa while working on the *Flute*. In particular, his research focused on the massacre of the Herero people in what today is Namibia by the German army led by general von Trotha between 1904 and 1907, one of the first examples of systematic ethnic cleansing by a European power and to some scholars a pioneer of the Holocaust (see Stratton 2008: 68 ff.). In the rendition of this scene in the *Black Box* installation Pamina disappears in silence, while Sarastro's voice remains as soundtrack for the rhino hunt: it is not difficult, at this point, to identify the hunters with Sarastro himself, thus shedding a chilling light on his proclamation of Enlightenment ideals of human brotherhood.

A figurine Law-Viljoen calls "Megaphone Man" (2007: 160) roams the stage at the beginning of this scene wearing a sandwich board calling for *Trauerarbeit* – the term Freud uses for the work of mourning – a theme that the rhino evokes throughout both the *Flute* and related works. McCrickard reminds us that the twin-horned African White rhino is an endangered species and "the symbol of a romantic, exploitative, colonialist view of Africa" (2007: 150); and the rhino's fragility is heightened by its vulnerability to the violence that will be exerted onto him in the aforementioned footage in act II.

The rhino embodies the vulnerability and precariousness of life, categories recently used by both Adriana Cavarero and Judith Butler to attempt a different categorization of humanity as a continuous exposure to violence. In her *Precarious Life*, Butler writes that there is "a primary vulnerability to others, one that one cannot will away without ceasing to be human" (2004: xiv); here it is the rhino that features as the operatic representation of this precariousness of life. Dancing to the tune of Tamino's flute and then shot down by colonial hunters, the rhino redraws the boundary between human and animal, as its silence echoes Pamina's in the scene from act II. In this way, the artist creates a bond between diva and animal as subaltern to Sarastro's patriarchal power. Yet, in the face of Pamina's eventual survival and domestication to the bourgeois ideal family, the rhino remains irreducible to power, a haunting reminder that something, in Sarastro's project of peace and civilization, has gone irretrievably wrong.⁵

Butler, in her argument for the precariousness of life and the politics of mourning, starts from a set of questions that are echoed by the rhino's story: "Who

⁵ The connection is made even more clearly at the beginning of *Black Box*, where an arrangement of Sarastro's aria for trumpets and orchestra, which assumes a chilling march-like resonance, works as backdrop for the savage beating of a black figurine by two other ones.



counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, what *makes for a grievable life?*" (ibid.: 20; italics in the text). Is the rhino's death, silently happening as backdrop of Sarastro's triumphal narrative of forgiveness and forgetfulness, grievable? If, in Sarastro's words, in his brave new world "the human loves the human" (Schikaneder 1956: 39), the violence over the helpless body of the rhino works as a reminder of the crude fact that, in Mozart's own time and for some centuries afterwards, some human beings – such as the Herero people in the eyes of von Trotha's army – were considered less than human, living beings on which violence could be exerted with little or no moral consequences: their lives were not, in Butler's terms, *grievable* at all.

The last part of *Black Box* is titled "Elegy for a Rhino": here, the dancing rhino comes back, defying death by the hands of hunters and pulling itself up on his hind legs, "a figure of strength and freedom [...] a reminder to us that colonialism, narrow learning and rationalism may tame and exploit us, but they can never crush the spirit" in McCrickard's words (2007: 152). I don't know whether to endorse this overall confident reading: Kentridge's rhino, as a postcolonial ghost, moves between worlds, a shifting signifier whose main effect, I believe, is to question any given interpretation, any closure over its body – either dancing or dead.⁶ The question to which the audience is left at the end of both the *Flute* and, more explicitly, of *Black Box*, is whether it is possible to mourn the death of the rhino, and whether opera, with its tradition in trafficking with death, may offer a place for a ceremony of mourning. Here, the rhino stands for the oppressed subject whose only signifying power is held in its otherwise dumb body, much as happens at the end of Spivak's essay on the subaltern (1998: 308).

Kentridge does not stage the voice of the diva as proxy for the subaltern subject, as some recent opera criticism has done: Herbert Lindenberger, for example, writes of opera heroines that "their racial specificity simply makes more explicit the subordinate role to which women in general were subjected and to which opera has sought (quite literally, in fact) to provide a voice" (1998: 197). The Queen of the Night, her oppositional stand against Sarastro's normative discourse notwithstanding, does not emerge as a viable alternative that may help elaborate a vocality of mourning for the dead rhino. The Queen of the Night does not mourn the loss of her kidnapped daughter: she strives for revenge, making impressive shows of power to make up for her utter disempowerment, her confinement outside the realm of light and reason.

The artist does not endorse the Queen's quest for revenge any more than he supports Sarastro's hegemonic worldview: retribution is just another form of violence, whose resonance for post-apartheid South Africa, and the African postcolonies in general, is too broad and complex to be analyzed here. Maybe this is why, for this hot-blooded woman whose project entails the annihilation of light altogether, Kentridge

⁶ For the role of haunting in postcolonial writing, see Cimitile (2005) and Del Villano (2007).



creates a starry sky where satellites spin out of their orbit at the sound of her extraordinary vocal flights – in the end creating a cage around the Queen herself. The Black Queen has to migrate, out of the opera if not out of music, to embody a different form of resistance, where the eccentric tracks drawn by her voice become not a cage but a ceremony of mourning. Her blackness becomes literal (but not quite) in the wooden cut-out figurine of a Herero woman moving across the miniature stage of *Black Box/Chambre Noire* on the same starry background conceived for the Queen of the Night. Here this animation follows the *Totenlist*, the names of the Herero people murdered by the Germans, that appear on screen while the uncanny, markedly ungendered voice of Vevangua Muuondjo sings to the lament tune from the march of the priests (scene 1, act II). Only after these names have dissolved in blazing shooting stars may the dancing rhino return for his elegy; here, it dances again to the sound of another woman's voice, Pamina's as she prays for death after Tamino has apparently forsaken her (scene 18, act II).

Pamina's plea for death is reshaped into an elegy, literally a song of mourning staging a dance duet featuring the rhino and Megaphone Man. The latter, according to Law-Viljoen, is "a trumpeter of events to come, a comical but sinister herald of the unfolding disaster [...] his sandwich board announc[ing] (or perhaps, more insidiously, advertis[ing]) a call to a personal and collective grieving" (2007: 166). In this light, the last somersault, by which the rhino goes over Megaphone Man and then exits the scene, may embody either the overcoming or the elusion of the work of mourning; after the rhino's last leap Megaphone Man leaves the stage with his megaphone head held low, after which only the end titles signal that some sort of ending has been reached. Still, this ending foregrounds no closure. The elegy has not taken place, mourning has been attempted, but violence is still lurking in the seams of representation: during his last dance the rhino is metamorphosed in a machine whose two arms beat ruthlessly on one another, in a scene remindful of previous ones in the installation.

Significantly, Kentridge chooses not to endorse a triumphal narrative of marginal otherness; his rhino is emphatically not an opera diva, 'deprived of all power and hence the most powerful' as Dolar had it. Yet as an opera diva, and as opera itself, it survives its own death to the point of presenting its own elegy. Its silence gives substance, if not voice, to the need to rearticulate painful histories like the Herero massacre. The dance of the rhino, called back from the dead by its irreducibility to the rhetoric of mourning, haunts Mozart's *Magic Flute*, which cannot tame the rhino anymore.



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Serena Guarracino holds a two-year research grant at the University of Naples "L'Orientale", where she received her PhD in 2005. She has published on the role of opera singers in nineteenth and twentieth century women's writing, the relations between music and postcolonial theory, and more recently on the influence of feminist theory in new musicology. She edited with Marina Vitale a double issue for the journal *AION Anglistica* titled "Music and the Performance of Identity" (13.1-2, 2009; www.anglistica.unior.it), and recently authored the book *La primadonna all'opera. Scrittura e performance nel mondo anglofono* (Trento: Tangram, 2009).

serena.guarracino@gmail.com