



Parsifal, Royal Opera House,
Live in Cinema, 18 December 2013

A personal review by Andy Ross

The Royal Opera House has staged an excellent rendition of Richard Wagner's final opera Parsifal. A notionally modern and minimalist but essentially timeless and inspirational stage setting presents the work well for modern sensibilities. A cubic frame suggests a hospital room for the sickbed of the suffering king Amfortas (played by Gerald Finley), who as the curtain rises is attended by medical orderlies plus a guild of distinguished gents in gray suits, minus neckties, to give the entire production a muted palette based largely on shades of gray. This guild is supposed to represent the knights of the holy grail.

Guild member Gurnemanz (René Pape) narrates the back story. Amfortas was wounded fighting Klingsor, whose attempt to join the guild was rebuffed when he failed to control his lust for women. Klingsor castrated himself in an attempt to gain admission, but to no avail, so in revenge he set up a garden stocked with maidens to seduce other men hoping to join the guild. Among the women is a strange and rather wild creature called Kundry (Angela Denoke), who had seduced

Amfortas and now tries to soothe his wound with balsam. She appears here in a plain drape, with a bald pate and bare feet, to signal her untamed soul and her freedom from social convention. But Amfortas had his sacred spear stolen by Klingsor, so his wound will not heal.

Enter Parsifal (Simon O'Neill), led on as a hapless fool who has just shot a swan with his bow and arrow. He is played as a plump duffer in rough clothes with an unkempt beard. The scene introduces him to Kundry. Now Gurnemanz leads them off to see the ceremony of the grail. In most productions of Parsifal, the grail is a golden chalice, but here it is an innocent boy, clad only in a loincloth, revealed in bright light as a holy innocent. Amfortas cuts the boy and draws blood. Presumably the rite is supposed to relieve his own pain. Casting the grail as a boy emphasizes the blood rituals in the myths behind the opera, but perhaps too heavily. On the other hand, casting a cup as the grail is a tired cliché that loses the bloody point.

In the second act we meet Klingsor (Willard W. White). He appears as a menacing figure in black, with a long black leather coat, in a characterization spoiled only by his obviously undamaged virility, who presides over the pleasure garden,

where the cubic frame now surrounds a bed for love and lust. Klingsor orders Kundry to seduce Parsifal. First the maidens in the garden get to work, and Parsifal is pleasantly amused, then Kundry moves in. The back story here is heavy. It seems that Kundry mocked the crucified Jesus ages earlier and was condemned to an eternal life of bitter regret. Now she wears rags and sleeps in a hole in the ground. But she looks presentable for the seduction and almost beds him. Parsifal is of course another holy innocent. He responds by feeling the pain of Amfortas and manages to resist her. Klingsor then attacks him with the sacred spear and blinds him, but Parsifal grabs the spear and departs.

The third act is set years later. The framed bed of Amfortas is now empty, and looks like the vacated tomb of Jesus after the crucifixion. Gurnemanz and Kundry meet blind Parsifal, weary from long travels and still carrying the sacred spear. His blindness has awakened his inner vision, and he has grown in wisdom over the years. Gurnemanz and Kundry proceed to anoint him as a saviour. A funeral now takes place as Amfortas buries his father. Amfortas is in great pain and begs the other guild members to kill him. Parsifal, his sight magically restored, returns the spear and heals Amfortas, then exits the stage with Kundry.

That was Parsifal, Wagner's greatest single opera, which he took decades to write and intended as the consecration rite for his new opera house in Bayreuth. We can see it as a reprise of the sort of eternal myth that lies behind many cultures and tribal groupings since time immemorial. The exact details are unimportant, but the elements are all resonant with multiple meanings that invite endless analysis.

Important in Wagner's telling is the music, both orchestral and choral, which has the effect of slowing down and eternalizing the action as if drowning it in a hot bath of viscous preserving fluid. What we get is a swirl of feelings in which the actions on stage lose their quotidian meaning and become consecrated as ritual.

The rite of the holy innocent whose redemptive suffering saves all concerned from their respective follies is universal enough to redeem four and a half hours of overwhelming music, offset with what we hear as supernaturally or divinely enhanced operatic voices, mouthing German words that on paper seem as crass as any pop lyrics. This is a musical version of a timeless tale, made ponderous and portentous by the setting and the score but still at heart a simple story, which lives by the response the music evokes in the audience. That response, in my case, was amply sufficient to justify my effort to attend the spectacle.

So the staging worked, for me at least. A few years ago I saw a more conventional staging of Parsifal in Germany, where the entire drama was clearly set in medieval times and the grail was a golden chalice. That was presumably how Wagner envisaged the production, and it impressed me as intended. But many modern viewers would have been left relatively cold by it. For them, a fresher staging, with clear modern echoes in business cartels, recent wartime atrocities, and media seductions of celebrities, must work more viscerally. To balance that, the religious symbolism of the grail needs to be emphasized, as in this case by making the grail a Christ figure. Therefore I am happy to congratulate the Royal Opera House on a job well done.

R