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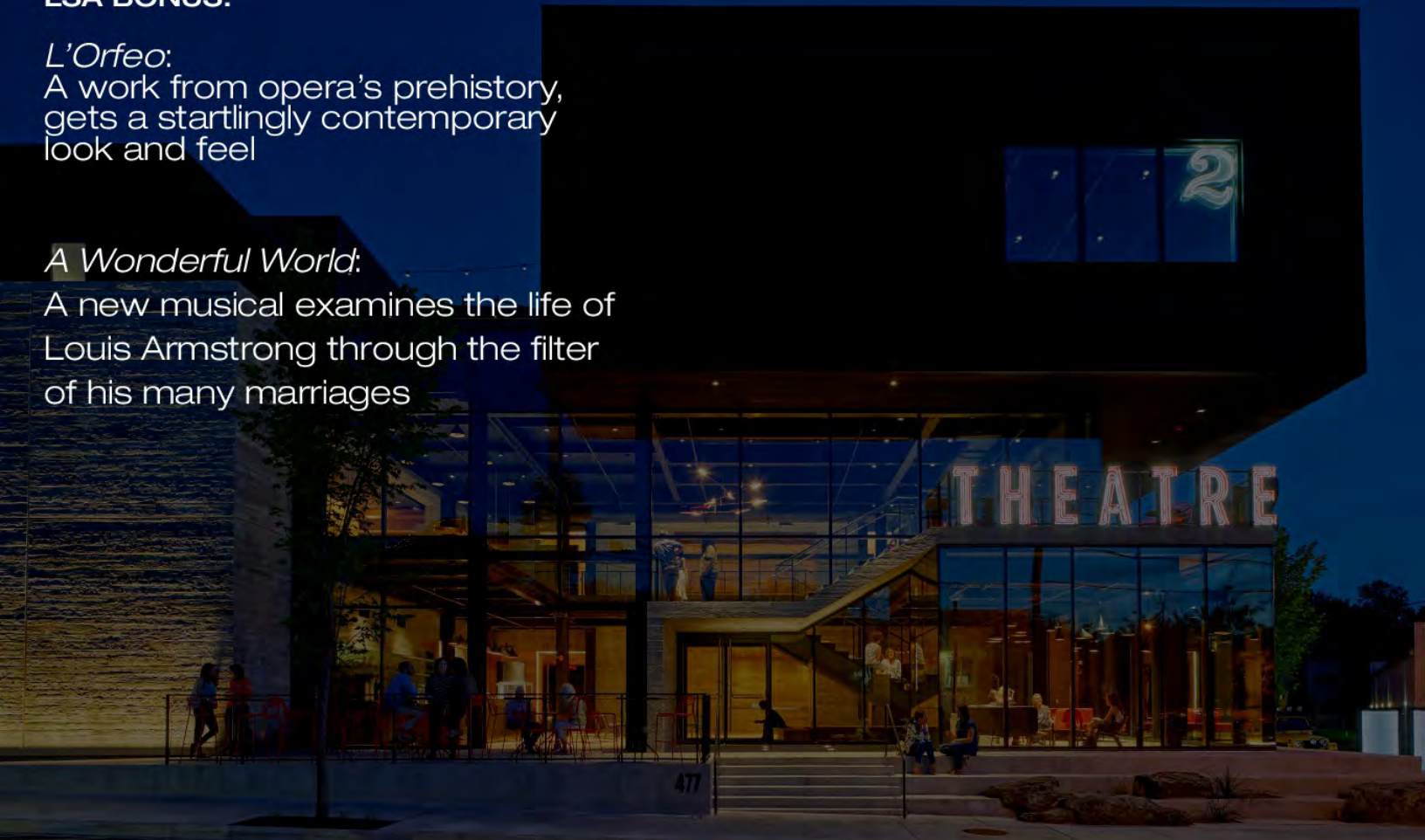
LSA BONUS:

L'Orfeo:

A work from opera's prehistory, gets a startlingly contemporary look and feel

A Wonderful World:

A new musical examines the life of Louis Armstrong through the filter of his many marriages



OPERA

Fly Like an Ego

L'Orfeo, a work from opera's prehistory, gets a startlingly contemporary look and feel

By: David Barbour
Photos: Marco Borggreve ©
Nederlandse Reisopera



A work that reaches back to the origins of opera as an art form, *L'Orfeo* all but calls out for reinvention by contemporary directors and designers. Composed in 1606–07 by Claudio Monteverdi to a libretto by Alessandro Striggio, it recounts the classic myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, lovers separated by death. Thanks to a dispensation by the Greek gods, Orpheus travels to the underworld to retrieve the woman he loves; the only proviso is that he may not look back at her as they return to earth. As everyone

based on Marcel Camus' film *Black Orpheus*, is in the works.

Despite its musical glories and a story that resonates across centuries, *L'Orfeo* is a work that can be difficult for modern audiences, who may find it to be too static and off-puttingly dominated by allegorical characters such as Music, Hope, and Echo. It can't be staged like, say, *Tosca*. At Nederlandse Reisopera, aka Dutch National Touring Opera, where a new production of *L'Orfeo* hit the road



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knows, the plan goes tragically awry. A tale that occupies a central place in the Western imagination, it has been adapted time and again. Recently, English National Opera presented an Orpheus-themed mini-season, consisting of Christoph Willibald Gluck's *L'Orfeo*; Jacques Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*; Harrison Birtwistle's *The Mask of Orpheus*; and Philip Glass's *Orphée*. One of Broadway's biggest current hits is *Hadestown*, a jazz treatment of the story; another musical,

beginning in January, the director Monique Wagemakers came up with an intriguingly theatrical concept, blending singers and dancers into a unified ensemble, reinventing the opera as a music-and-movement piece.

The effect was to frame *L'Orfeo* in an excitingly contemporary way. On the website *Movement Exposed*, the critic Bregtje Schudel wrote, "Most of the time it isn't even really clear who in the ensemble is a singer and who is a dancer. All 20 performers—ten dancers, ten singers—are together



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onstage, moving as one amorphous organism (director Monique Wagemakers herself likens it to softly waving coral). Then a solitary figure emerges from the mass: Musica (Luciana Mancini), who introduces us to the tragic story of Orpheus (Samuel Boden), a famous Thracian singer and half-god whose musical prowess was so unparalleled he could charm the pants off any creature, living or dead.”

Schudel adds, “I would be hard-pressed to tell you where Wagemakers’ direction ends and the choreography by Nanine Linning begins. Apart from several short bursts of stand-alone choreography, where the ten dancers from Dance Company Nanine Linning detach from the herd, and the solo singing parts, the performers all blend together seamlessly. The singers have been specifically selected for their moving abilities. Only Orpheus stands out from the pack. He is the driving force of the story. The other performers could be seen as a manifestation of his inner life, Wagemakers explained in an interview...They comfort and support him, huddling and nestling themselves around him

like affectionate cats. When Eurydice’s death has rendered Orpheus speechless, they vocalize his anguish.”

Nicolas Nguyen, on the website *Bachtrack*, adds, “They dance as one cluster, then disperse during brief solo performances, to aggregate again in what resembles an organic entity that pulsates to the vibration of the theorbos [a plucked string instrument featured in the opera’s orchestration]. This impression of one living organism is reinforced by their ribbed, flesh-colored costumes by fashion designer Marlou Breuls.”

The concept of the company as an extension of the leading character’s personality was interestingly mirrored in the set design by Lonneke Gordijn, of Studio Drift, an artistic collective consisting of her and Ralph Nauta. In Gordijn’s concept, the stage was dominated by an installation known as *Ego*, described in the production publicity materials as “a moving hand-woven sculpture, of 9m x 4.5m x 4.5m, made of nylon thread.”

Ego, which requires 16km of wire of the sort used in fishing, is so named because it was intended as a kind of



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extension of Orpheus’ personality. As Gordijn has written, “In combination with the interaction of the singers and dancers, the sculpture shows the inner world of Orpheus. Orpheus is stuck in his own rigid thinking about love and life. Only when his world collapses completely—due to the loss of Eurydice—does he rise above his own ability. He has to compete with the laws of nature and this new goal in his life completely changes his perspective and suddenly makes him a powerful figure...The movements of the sculpture depict Orpheus’ emotions, his fears, and his strength. As a result, ‘Ego’ is not so much just ‘the set’ as a soloist in this production.”

As the photos on these pages show, Ego was subject to many configurations. The piece is described as “a massive woven block, made of more than 16km of hair-thin Japanese fluorocarbon.” Because of its massive size, a special loom was created to make it. Custom software and algorithms were developed, allowing a puppeteer to control each movement from eight corners. At the same, the piece

can fold up and be carried in a relatively small case. (A smaller version of Ego was shown at New York’s Pace Gallery in early March, just before the city shut down from the coronavirus.)

“The biggest challenge was to create swift and sharp movements and we developed a tensioner on the pulley system to achieve that and to ensure that the strings never get entangled on the stage even when fully extended,” Gordijn told the website Wallpaper.com, which goes on to say, “During the performance, an operator directs the block to align with the performers. The super-thin wires that are used have a resistance in the air so that when the block drops, it doesn’t fall but floats down.” Indeed, Gordijn has achieved something extraordinary: a piece of scenery as sensitive as any performer onstage.

Lighting

Such a scenic element—and production—required lighting as equally attuned to nuance. Thomas Hase, the produc-

OPERA

tion's lighting designer, says the company "did something they've never done before, flying me in for a week in December to watch rehearsals in the studio." Such preparation would prove to be crucial to the production's success, he adds. "They had set up Ego. The Reisopera also does something called a 'building rehearsal,' which, usually, only the Germans do; it involves mocking up a set to the scale of it essentially right.

"I was lighting *A Little Night Music* at the Reisopera in March 2019, when work was beginning on *L'Orfeo*. Studio Drift brought in several different types of scenic material; we hung rigging points and used the *Night Music* lighting rig to see how the material picked up light from different directions."

Out of this experience, Hase says, "We made many choices. The idea was to have Ego in a black box consisting of a black surround and a black floor. The set's walls were a black, absorbent, orchestra shell material; the floor consisted of deep black Marley panels. You see the performers and Ego and nothing else."

You can probably see where this going. "I had many meetings with Andreas Heinen, the technical director," Hase says. "In the first variation of the black surround,

there were two full sidewalls and a back wall, with no openings. I said to Andreas, 'I need to light the dancers and singers separate from the block [another name for Ego] and I have no place to do that.' The sidewalls were then raised to 2m 20mm off the floor and wings were built into the structure to allow for bays of sidelighting with hard masking. We focused the sidelight in an enormously complicated and thorough process, shooting from one bay downstage and the next bay upstage, with units placed on the floor and at the 2m 20mm trim height. This allowed us to get complete coverage of bodies without hitting the wings on the far side of the stage. We used [ETC] Lustr 2s, doing a series of thin and narrow shots, an approach that gave us this incredible upstage and downstage isolation." Do not forget that this production was built for the road: "On tour, they have one day of setup for performance; the Reisopera staff is pretty amazing and the touring LD, Lianne Eikelenboom, is simply brilliant."

Of course, lighting the cast was only half the battle. "Monique, the director, came up with many of the block's movements—the swipe, the drop-down, and the dark cloud, in which it moves through eight positions across 18 minutes. I lit the block with overhead moving lights and





Opposite: The ribbed, flesh-colored costumes were created by fashion designer Martou Breuls. Above: "It was like lighting a piece of glass," Hase says.

some movers in low positions." The positions were necessary for providing coverage: "The block begins the opera on the floor; the company rises out of it. You don't know what it is when you first see; a downlight special shows La Musica coming up out of the floor. [La Musica, as the narrator, inaugurates the action.] Then the block rises from the floor over 12 minutes."

As the production unfolded, the block reconfigured itself constantly, posing challenges for the lighting designer; once again, intensive preparation was the key. "This was the first time I've had a director do storyboards, like on a film," Hase says. (He also notes that the block requires constant technical attention. "All the individual strands of wire link with the frame that defines it. Each piece is glued on, individually; it was built over a year and a half. They have to do repair work on it every day—a strand here and a strand there.") In the second half of the production, when Orpheus descends into the underworld, the block came down and was stuffed in a box, the dimensions of which were 1m x 1m x 1m.

Indeed, much of Hase's work involved concealment as much as illumination. "There were four towers—two upstage and two downstage; they were precisely balanced with the black scenic void and were masked. Two wires with motors were attached to the towers, one high and one low. The trick of lighting this show was this: You've

got strings, made of a thick monofilament, that you don't want to be seen. They had to disappear so the actual block appeared to be constantly floating." Not that this was always easy or even possible: For example, he notes, "the downstage strings often had singers standing next to them." He adds, "That was one of the joys of the sidelight bays; you occasionally saw the lower wires, but never the higher ones. The block seemed to float in mid-air, and you couldn't see how."

How did Ego take light? "Essentially," he says, "it was like lighting pieces of glass. Sources placed upstage of it would grab onto it, but if the backlight was located directly at center stage, you'd get a river of light there, but it wouldn't extend to the sides." In each case, carefully thought-out positions and judicious use of individual units allowed the designer to isolate both scenery and performers as needed without unnecessarily exposing the workings of the Ego's design. Indeed, the project posed a constant series of questions about positions, Hase says, "Any front light made the block disappear. Backlight picked it up, but only in certain places. We spent two weeks of 12-hour days doing math and matching angles: If it was at this position, what could we pick it up with, without blowing out the walls and sides? How could I stay off the floor as much as I possibly could? It was mind-bending; values of 10%, high or lower, made a huge difference



in terms of hot spots or streaks. We had a hundred-odd presets, and every shutter was in place.”

The company’s rig included 32 ETC Lustr 2s in sidelight towers, and 20 JB Lighting P12 HCs overhead, along with 16 Elation Professional ZFX LED RGBW wash units. The rig also featured, from ARRI, six Studio 5Ks, two Compact 2.5Ks, and two Compact 4Ks. The Compacts were outfitted with color scrollers, allowing Hase to crate the grays and light blues that informed much of the design. Also used were Look Solutions Unique and MDG Atmosphere hazers.

Other aspects of the lighting rig included eight Selecon Pacifics, for additional sidelight, and 32 Elation Arena Q7 Zooms, placed in a 32cm gap built-in the upstage surround, to create a wall of backlight. At certain points, the

upstage surround was raised to reveal this opening, which remained open through the underworld scene, lighting the performers and giving the block a kind of liquid shimmer. In Act II, a downstage scrim was added, requiring a bridge followspot to track Orpheus; where no bridge was possible, the design integrated two Robe T1 moving lights controlled by a Robe RoboSpot system. “It’s is fascinating,” says Hase of the RoboSpot. “An operator is running the moving light using a video screen crosshair. The intensity and color are then controlled via the [ETC Eos] lighting console.”

Orpheus ascending

The finale included the use of video. “As Apollo came down from heaven,” Hase says, “we went to just two tight



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sidelights on Orpheus and a section of the floor was pulled back to reveal the video floor underneath. The Apollo – Orpheus duet was sung on this glowing floor with content running by Studio Drift. At the end of the duet, the image, which was a close-up of Ego’s lines, zoomed to the center section of the floor and disappeared. At that moment, the three laser projectors on the first electric began showing the image of the block spinning in a void, which also ran on the video floor. We did a hot center light in gold as they ascended to heaven, at which point the block had disappeared.”

“In her direction,” wrote critic Thea Derks, “Monique Wagemakers forges song, dance, music, costumes, and scenery together into an inseparable whole. The performance is compelling, poetic, and enchanting and fits seam-

lessly with the stylized language with which Monteverdi introduced the opera genre in 1607.”

Another reviewer, Kester Freires, added, “The transparent, glittering canvas depicts everything the opera is about: Sometimes it is the Styx, the underworld river, then the underworld itself and the boat of ferryman Charon who transfers the living souls to the dark, cold ghost realm; it even symbolizes the soul of Orpheus’ beloved Eurydice when she has to return to the underworld. If Eurydice is in the sky as a constellation at the end, the sculpture looks like the starry sky...Thomas C. Hase beautifully shapes the wandering souls in the underworld as also roaming points of light.”