

## Shedding Light on Artistic Vision: Q&A with *Iolanta* Scenic Designer and Director, and Lighting Designer

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Dallas Opera

**By Linda Smith**

Pyotr Tchaikovsky was never a fan of his last opera *Iolanta*, finished a year before his death in 1893. He felt it repeated themes from his earlier operas, and the plot is simple,

especially when compared to other works in the operatic genre. As such, it is rarely performed. *Iolanta* takes us through the world of the title character, who is born a blind princess. She is raised by castle servant Bertrand and his wife Marta, and is unaware of her blindness and status. In fact, she naïvely and tragically believes that eyes are only for crying. The opera is a back-and-forth between two helpful characters -- a doctor who can cure Iolanta's blindness and her love interest Count Vaudémont -- and her well-meaning yet obstinate father King René.

Scenic designer and director Christian Räth, and light designer Thomas C. Hase explain their vision for *Iolanta*, and how this production came about.

**Räth** The piece was suggested to me by the Dallas Opera's General Director Keith Cerny. I didn't know the opera at the time but I found it was a work that spoke to me immediately. From the start, we agreed that the production would incorporate video, and I thought it would be an interesting idea to explore what goes on inside the mind of a person who is blind. Theatrically, I thought it would be great to use the video and lighting design to aid in that exploration and to make the experience of being blind--or partially blind--palpable to the audience.

For me, *Iolanta* isn't a realistic piece. It's about the inner workings of the title character's mind and what, in this context, blindness really means. The princess cannot see but perhaps even more to the point, she cannot communicate with the people around her. For me, it's not physical blindness that needs to be cured, it's a psychologically induced inability to see. Which poses the questions, "Why is she blind? What led to it, and can she be helped?" In this new production, the doctor is not a miracle-worker: He has the wisdom and experience to guide Iolanta in the direction she must go, in order to heal herself; very much like a modern-day psychiatrist.

At the time this piece was written, there had been huge recent discoveries about the unconscious and subconscious mind by Sigmund Freud and others, so, for me, it's very much a psychological drama wrapped in the trappings of a fairy tale. The more you get into the piece, the more you discover the beauty and the power of it.

**Because blindness is the crux of the matter, it must present certain challenges for the lighting designer of this show.**

**Hase:** It does. All the surfaces are projected upon and I have to keep the lighting off those surfaces in order to allow the projections to be seen as envisioned. At the same time, we have to be able to view the singers onstage as they perform. This logistical challenge allows us to emphasize Iolanta's personal perspective, using very low side light which keeps our perspective down and tight and focused on the characters onstage...

**As though reflecting Iolanta's limited or non-existent field of vision?**

**Hase:** Yes, but it also reflects the internalization of vision as well. We are not just following a storyline, we're following the title character's emotional journey. There's a point in the production where Vaudemont says, "She's blind," a comment overheard by the princess. At that moment, we do a burst of low light on her from the front that scores out her shadow, paralleling what's happening inside her, emotionally, at that moment.

**This seems like an opportune moment to backtrack and test the director on his ability to provide a thumbnail sketch of the plot and characters.**

**Räth:** Lolanta is a princess, although that's not all that relevant to this opera. She is a young woman growing up and going through that transition to independent adulthood that we all experience. It's about becoming her own person and cutting the umbilical cord, so to speak, with her controlling father. The father is a typical late-19th century patriarch; a king, yes, but chiefly the authority figure of this piece. Perhaps without realizing it, he has clipped his daughter's wings, to the detriment of her eyesight as well as her soul. He is so overpowering, he doesn't allow his daughter to see the world for herself. Although he genuinely wants her cured, he's also the root of the problem. Lolanta is not just blind, she's kept in the dark about her condition on explicit orders from her own father.

There are two young men in this tale -- Lolanta's fiancé, the Duke of Burgundy, whom she's never met, and his friend, Count Vaudémon -- who have discovered the entrance to a secret garden where the Princess is kept. There, the friend falls deeply in love with her, but after discovering the truth about her condition, also wishes to find a way to restore her sight, if possible.

The other key character in this story is the doctor, who, to my mind, is the alter ego of the repressive father. He is, literally, the way to the light.

**Why is this opera house and the Dallas Opera, for that matter, a really good place to conduct this sort of theatrical experiment?**

**Räth:** There's a leadership here that is "game" to bring these rarely performed gems to the general public, Keith Cerny and Music Director Emmanuel Villaume, who knows the piece inside and out and has toured with this opera. On top of that, the intimacy of the Winspear Opera House allows us to invite audience members to embark with the title character on a life-altering journey. This is an intimate piece -- a chamber opera even -- and having a close connection with the characters onstage is incredibly important. I can't think of any other theater in the United States better suited to allow us to musically, acoustically and visually make that possible.

**Hase:** In terms of technology, the company has made the commitment to project and to make the necessary tools available to a projections designer (in this instance, the brilliant Elaine J. McCarthy). The company has also made the commitment to provide a lot of lighting sources in both usual and unusual spots. The Dallas Opera is very much

up for the challenges of doing a piece like this and creating this complicated theatrical environment.

**Do either of you have a favorite scene or moment in this opera?**

**RÄth:** Musically, the big centerpiece is the love duet between Iolanta and Vaudémont. The evolution of their relationship in this piece is really interesting, going from their first encounter where they fall in love to the realization that she is blind and the ultimate commitment they make to each other which, I believe, is the heart of this opera.

**Hase:** I agree, I find that my favorite moment is the love duet, in part, because she makes him see -- for a moment -- through her eyes: "I do know what flowers are from their fragrance, and what birds are like from hearing their songs." I find the way the senses interrelate, and the way in which she expresses that in this gorgeous duet, fantastic.

*The Dallas Opera production of Tchaikovsky's IOLANTA opens 7:30 p.m. Friday, April 10 at the Winspear Opera House and will give four performances through April 18.*  
[www.dallasopera.org](http://www.dallasopera.org).