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THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Between Worlds: the dangers of transforming 9/11 into stylised art

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A considerable musical accomplishment – in some ways. © ENO/Hugo Glendinning

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Between Worlds, Tansy Davies's operatic dramatisation of 9/11, has prompted very mixed reactions since it opened at London's Barbican. Critics have variously described it as "an orgy of tedious breast-beating", said that it "tears at the heart" or dismissed it as "too respectful". One commentator greatly admires the libretto whilst another thinks it "dire". No consensus here.

But this wasn't really a surprise. I've now seen it twice, and think it's a considerable musical accomplishment in some ways. But nonetheless it brings to the fore bigger issues about how viable such operatic realism can be – and the appropriation of horrific events into art works for consumption.

The work can be considered an example of the "CNN opera", in that it uses recent and newsworthy events or personalities for its setting and plot. The most notorious (and controversial) such work is probably John Adam's *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991), a dramatisation of the 1985 hijacking of the cruise ship *Achille Lauro* by the Palestine Liberation Front, during which an elderly Jewish-American passenger, Leon Klinghoffer, was murdered.

Soon after 9/11, the Boston Symphony Orchestra cancelled scheduled performances of choruses from *Klinghoffer* "to err on the side of being sensitive". Leading American critic and musicologist Richard

Taruskin responded to those who criticised this move with an intemperate piece arguing that the work employed anti-Semitic stereotypes and romanticised terrorists.

If Klinghoffer attracted criticism in light of 9/11, *Between Worlds* inhabits potentially safer territory, joining an ever-increasing canon of musical works alluding to the events.



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Clash of music and text

We follow five principal characters (a janitor, a female realtor, a young man, a young woman and an older man) from the beginning of their day, through their being stranded in the north tower, until the inevitable collapse. A small choir provides a combination of background dialogue, commentary and mourning. The realism of the setting is offset by the character of the Shaman, sung by a counter-tenor on a high platform above all others.

Throughout much of the first two-thirds of the opera, the prosaic dialogue of Nick Drake's weak libretto clashes with Davies's score. This is because the moderate modernist style of the music is quite different from the minimalist or neo-tonal idioms (sometimes alluding to popular genres) more usually found in CNN operas. The rhythms, phrases and internal melodies of the text need to be more compatible with this type of music.

The ethereal opening, with eerie melodies, whistling, bell-ringing and recitation from the Shaman, is most striking and menacing. But in the following aria for the janitor, Davies attempts to build the music around the natural pitches and rhythms of the words, which just sounds contrived. Questions of why the text is sung rather than spoken are equally prominent when the chorus then sings or chants phrases such as "we start with the high temperatures", "what's that Dolly Parton song?", "reminder meeting today" and even "can't open an important PDF". The sharply stylised rhythms can

be unintentionally amusing, as when characters later sing “oh shit, she’s not there” or “oh no, it’s gone to voicemail”.

Sung not spoken

When the main characters are introduced, the music conveys some extra information about their personalities or emotional state, but this is insufficiently distinctive or consistent to make the above questions disappear. More convincing are the intertwined passages with increasingly stylised choral writing, introduction of the Requiem Mass in Latin and the Ave Maria in Spanish, and several passages in which the janitor and the young man’s parts are doubled or sung in counterpoint with that of the Shaman in a type of communion with another world.

But after the first tower’s collapse Davies is on safer ground with increasingly urgent and hysterical vocal writing. From here to the conclusion the work conveys a sense of overwhelming transfiguration and mourning. Davies employs different musical strategies to signify the impacts of the aircraft and the collapse of the buildings. Some are relatively obvious, such as the explosive flurry of activity for the impact of the first jet, or the incessant repeated chords and descending figures for the collapse of the south tower.

For the collapse of the north tower the musical response is more subtle – and Davies appears to allude to the intricately staggered ascending figures of the drowning music from Berg’s *Wozzeck*, creating a certain dialectical tension between a music that goes up, and a tower that falls, underlining the sense of transfiguration.



The janitor. © ENO/Hugo Glendinning

Exquisite spectacle?

Klinghoffer featured an “Aria of the Falling Body”, as the body of murdered Klinghoffer is thrown into the sea. Between Worlds has a “Dance of Air and Wire, for Earth”, which features some of the most striking music (foregrounding dissonant use of the harp, with its angelic associations). But the accompanying action raises questions more serious than those already described.

Earlier on in the opera we had seen in the background a slowly falling man, sometimes clutching a tree. At the time of the second tower collapse, two characters attach (in a Brechtian non-naturalistic fashion) ropes to the janitor, and he is held by the Shaman as he drifts downwards almost like a bird.

This was omitted on the second night I saw the work, but a related dance remained: a dance in the air between a young woman on the ground and the limp body of a man lifted up and down, using ropes, then hoisted up out of sight. After seeing the horrifying footage of people jumping from burning buildings, it is hard not to see this as in extremely poor taste. From this point, through to the final *Lux aeterna* (“eternal light”, a part of the *Requiem Mass*), a real event of carnage and bloodshed is turned into an aesthetic spectacle.

However compelling all this is, it brings to mind the concern raised by Theodor Adorno about Arnold Schoenberg’s *A Survivor from Warsaw*:

The aesthetic principle of stylization, and even the solemn prayer of the chorus, make an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror removed.

How can an art work begin to compete with the spectacle of that fateful day (described as “Lucifer’s greatest work of art” by composer Karlheinz Stockhausen)? Ultimately, representation of traumatic events here acts more as an emotional catharsis than to illuminate heightened understanding. Between Worlds is far from the first work to do this, but in this case – in contrast to Klinghoffer – it all seems rather too “easy”.

Were this to be an opera projecting the horror of characters trapped in a burning building in Baghdad in 2003, or Gaza in 2014, then much more difficult but pertinent questions would be asked.



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