

Opera Inside-Out

Reversed Staging for Sensory Immersion

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Abstract

How can the unseen be heard and imagined through operatic means? In the chamber opera *In the Darkness, Everything Went All Black* – set in pitch-black darkness – the stage was radically inverted. For the purpose of exploring the immersive potential of spatial reversal, methods for operatic creation and presentation were rethought in terms of visibility, layout, work order, and surveillance. Firstly, the visual default mode of the lit stage was reversed so that total darkness became the foundation for both discreet and shocking light effects. Secondly, the conventional theatrical layout was reversed and the audience was placed in half-circles at the centre of the venue, facing outwards from a void – surrounded by the performance instead of surrounding it. Thirdly, the common operatic work order was reversed so that the set design was workshopped and determined before the libretto and score were written. Fourthly, the relation between audience and ensemble was reversed as the performers observed the audience through IR-cameras while the audience for most of the time was denied visual stimuli and overview. The artistic outcomes of this opera show that *negative staging* (decreasing sensory information) can effectively contrast *positive staging* (increasing sensory information) as an artistic tool, highlighting the dynamics of operas as multi-sensory compositions.

Key words: opera, immersion, inversion, reversal, staging, set design, spectatorship, information

*Then a yell of utter, ultimate fright and stark
madness wrenched from scores of human throats
– a yell which came strong and clear despite the
depth from which it must have burst; after which
darkness and silence ruled all things.*

From *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*
by H. P. Lovecraft

Our interest in opera lies with the collaboratively composite art form's potential for layering and linking multi-sensory information, exchanged between live parties in shared acoustic time-spaces apart from everyday life. However, where information can be sensorily maximized, it can also be deliberately reduced and obscured in order to infuse mystery and excitement. In 2018, set designer Mattias Rylander suggested a fresh point of departure for the independent opera company Operation Opera: darkness as default mode for an operatic work. From this idea, Operation Opera (represented by opera singer Hedvig Jalhed, opera singer Agnes Wästfelt, and set designer Mattias Rylander) teamed up with the independent theatre group Teatr Weimar (represented by playwright Jörgen Dahlqvist and composer Kent Olofsson) to produce the conceptual chamber opera *In the Darkness, Everything Went All Black* (Rylander et al. 2018). One of our aims has been to explore how withholding information can potentially increase immersion. By inverting the setup in terms of visibility, layout, work order, and surveillance, we have investigated how the unseen can be heard and imagined through operatic means.

Contextualization

Modes of spectatorship in opera have indeed varied over time, but have also been connected to institutional standardization. In the late 19th century, Richard Wagner paved the way for a de-socialized and reverential operatic attendance by darkening the auditorium, thereby hindering social exchange during the artistic presentation. By the 1920s, visual obscuration of theatre auditoriums had become the new norm and enforced theatre etiquette contributed to the sedation of the audience (Heim 2016).

Today, evolving modes of spectating can be traced from experimental theatre in general to the realm of both contemporary opera and new music theatre. In new opera, this includes alternative venues for new operatic experiences, audience mobility, and *immersion* through audio technology, virtual reality, and location. The new interest in immersive live performance since the early

2000s includes an embryonic strand of immersive opera. In these works, immediacy and intimacy between the different participants are central: 'In trying to create more immersive operatic performances, the key device is to dissolve the division between the audience and the stage, usually by putting the spectators and performers in the same space.' (Kara 2017, 578) Like immersive theatre, immersive opera tends to apply a 'surrounded', 'surrounding', or 'interspersed' (Weinstein 2017) 'space relationship' (Bowman 1964) to embrace and merge the incoming with a constructed world of sensuality and alternate information, which the visitor is expected to help upholding and even contribute to.

Darkness as Immersive Feature

We refer to immersion as a state of being involved in a momentarily prioritized setting or situation to a degree that makes you forget about the outside world and relational reality (Jalhed in press). This can be achieved through intense sensory input and task solving, but also by blocking out information from the surroundings. Hence, stimulation, concentration, and grades of isolation are at the core of immersive practices and processes. There are several examples of the usage of darkness to theatrically immerse visitors – such as for instance Lundahl & Seidl's *Observatory* (2011a) and *The Infinite Conversation* (2011b) – and also culinary adventures involving dining in the dark. There are fewer examples of operas that immerse visitors in darkness while surrounding them with musicodramatic action – one is *Confessions* (Vitkauskaitė, Hedman, and Nordgren 2017) by the Spatial Opera Company, in which the visitors wear blinding masks.

Research Methods

We have applied a practice-based approach in which we, in our professions as artists, explore and question conventions of operatic production and the effects of a reversal of found habits. Hence, our inquiry is rooted within the field of artistic research. We emphasize our two personal positions at the extreme ends of the production chain (those of the constructing set designer and



The set design for *In the Darkness, Everything Went All Black* at Atalante in Gothenburg 2018. Photo by Hedvig Jalhed.

the executing performer) in order to illuminate the effects of the experimental artwork from two diametrically different directions. Our artistic process has been documented through our journaling and recording of events during the production and presentation of the opera. The artwork and its performances are available both as score and audio-video files. Finally, we make our analysis from the perspective of practical insider know-how in order to shed light on the problems and possibilities for practitioners that emerge through our work.

Artistic Process and Outcomes

The conceptual basis for *In the Darkness, Everything Went All Black* was decided on communally, and the creative team and performing ensemble – consisting of two sopranos and one live-electronic musician – was put together before the work was conceived. The initial point of departure was to construct an operatic experience of unseeing, fitting any flat-floored venue where it was possible to exclude all incoming light in order to use

theatrical elements in the manner of ‘reversed type’ in graphic design.

From Workshop to Performance

In our first workshops, our primary challenge was to set a room with the possibility for a complete blackout and test how the space could be transformed and dissolved through spatialization of sound, lighting, and human movement in darkness. This evolved into the convex layout for the audience seats, which served two purposes: to turn visitor attention towards disparate directions instead of a common centre, and to facilitate the performers’ orientation through regularities and symmetry. Placed in half-circles facing outwards from the central point of emptiness, the exposed visitors could sit with their backs to each other and their attention towards the room instead of their peers – like an inverted panopticon.

The set design is normally the last sub-work to be added before an opera is brought to life through human performance, but in *In the Darkness, Every-*



Characters in flash light, from performance at Inter Arts Center in Malmö 2018. Photo by Mattias Rylander.

thing Went All Black, the spatial conditions determined the framework for both the libretto and the score, and the work order was thus partly reversed. In other, non-operatic, forms of music theatre, drafting of scenographic ideas in the initial production phase might sometimes be more common than in opera. Such is the case with the type of *composed theatre* engaging Olofsson and Dahlqvist in their common works with Teatr Weimar. They speak of ‘shared physical space’ and the composer Olofsson highlights how a clear impression of the visual design of the stage can guide the creative process already from the start (Olofsson 2018). In this project, their strategy aligned with our idea about reversal as a general artistic method.

Since our intention was to make the visitors *see* in the dark and to play with more or less dramatic light effects after accustoming their eyes to darkness, masks were not an option for this opera. Even with darkness as the default mode, we still strived toward a dynamic latitude for action, with possibilities to synchronize optic effects with musical elements and performer movement. Instead of showing and inviting the visitors into a lit area of visual input, the artwork and the performers moved into a space of turbulent sound only – an auditorium without a stage. The immersive effect of darkness itself embedded the perceivers together with a large number of spatialising loud-speakers and moving opera singers, equipped with IR-cameras (using infrared technology) to orient themselves without light.

The dramatic situation emerging through Dahlqvist’s libretto was derived from our joint

establishment of the room itself. The plot deliberately contained open elements and there was no direct verbal information about the scenery or the identity of the characters. However, the room was not empty: its content was visually revealed on one occasion, in a short and brutal flash of light (controlled by the opera singers themselves) after about 45 minutes of darkness. For those with eyes open in either direction, one of the characters in full costume appeared together with photographic backdrops in high contrast. This dramatic point of stylized ‘reversal’ and ‘discovery’ in the Aristotelian sense (Aristotle 2013) turned the characters into embodied persons, as clarity of sight was followed by clarity of tonality and words.

Eight public performances of the opera were given in Halmstad, Reykjavik, Gothenburg, and Malmö between July 2018 and February 2019. As a part of Jalhed’s doctoral project (in press), the visitors were given the opportunity to share in a short survey their personal, internal visualizations from the information given while immersed in darkness. This showed that the drive to associate and fill in the blanks in many cases triggered concrete fantasies from the fragmented and incomplete but still multi-sensory experience that we created, resulting in a co-creative activation of the individual visitor’s mind (ibid.).

Discussion and Conclusions

From the set designer’s point of view, the production became a rare opportunity to influence and guide the verbo-musical composition from

the start. The common habit of treating operatic set design as a stand-alone dimension added later became moot, as it now was the very basis for the work itself. This goes against the mainstream faiblesse for so-called director's opera, 'which advocates scenographic autonomy' (Kara 2017). From the live-performing opera singer's point of view, to appear unseen triggered intensified and more versatile vocal performance. Through the immersive sound technology, an even wider range of vocal sounds could be employed. Furthermore, the deprivation of visitor sight during most of the experience allowed for startling closeness and even subtle touching as tools for performance.

The radical reversal of the relationship between host and visitor in terms of observation problematizes the conventional view of theatrical objectification. Jalhed (in press) advocates that the distinction between audiences (perceivers) and artists (performers) could be replaced by the distinction between visitors (discoverers) and hosts (disclosers) in order to highlight the issue of inside information instead of behaviour or position. Perception and performance are seldom separate modes for any party in live-meetings, and the role reversal that we experimented with – with artists perceiving visitors more than vice versa – toys with this complexity.

Normally in opera, information is added layer by layer in order to maximize the experience and fit as much as possible into one single multi-sensory display. We refer to this as *positive staging* (increasing information). From our study of *In the Darkness, Everything Went All Black*, we propose that *negative staging* (decreasing information) could enforce immersion by making the visitors invest in the performance through their private fantasies when visually understimulated. This is based on the observation that our withdrawal of concrete input seemed to cause the visitors to be occupied with imagining what they could not know while disconnecting from the outside world. Hence, we encourage further explorations of processual disruption and negative staging in operatic and other multi-sensory works. We conclude that since it is obviously possible to activate the co-creation of 'wandering minds', 'when one's individual

thoughts shift away from the task at hand' (Barnett and Kaufman 2020, 6), distinctly subjective visitor interpretations in real-time may be an artistic objective for new opera and immersive art practices starting from the notions of reversal and inversion.

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