

Rebel with a Cause



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 Makeup and hair by Chuck Jensen, Mark Edward, Inc.
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A cruise through Chicago Opera Theater’s website immediately confirms that this isn’t your parents’ opera company. Words such as “Provocative,” “Rebel” and “Cutting Edge” explode from the screen. It may be hyperbole, but it has a truthful ring, since Chicago Opera Theater has long specialized in innovative reimagining of standard repertory that resonates with contemporary consciousness.

Among the most intriguing figures to emerge at COT is Manhattan-based stage director Diane Paulus. “Cutting Edge” indeed: Paulus’s theatrical endeavors have included *Brutal Imagination*, based on the Susan Smith child murders, *The Donkey Show*, a retro-clubby take on *A Midsummer*

Night’s Dream, and *Running Man*, a scorching examination of the African-American experience that won an Obie Award for performance and design.

Raised four blocks from Lincoln Center in a musical family, Paulus studied piano for fifteen years with an eye toward a concert career. Juilliard beckoned, but sensing that the cloistered life of an instrumentalist was not for her, she elected to pursue her undergraduate degree at Harvard, clinching a Drama League and Peter Ivers Fellowship along the way, and complete an MFA at Columbia. Those early years, however, left an invaluable legacy: the ability to derive dramatic inspiration from the written note.

An operatic entrée came about as the inspiration of COT general director Brian Dickie, who, needing a director for Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*, remembered the quicksilver intelligence Paulus displayed while interning with director Andrei Serban. A meeting with conductor Jane Glover was arranged. “It was the most unlikely combination one could imagine,” Glover remembers. “Here was this kid who did rock versions of Shakespeare off-off-Broadway, and here was this middle-aged English Mozartean with an academic background. But of all the relationships I have had with directors, this is the most important, and that’s saying something.”

The partnership of this musically literate young director with this most theatrical of conductors has proved extraordinary, with that initial *Orfeo* leading to further collaborations in Monteverdi, Mozart and Britten, in productions distinguished by incisive theatricality and impeccable musicianship. “I am there for every music rehearsal,” Paulus says firmly. “Questions come up like ‘What is the dramatic purpose of this fermata?’ Those are discussions Jane will invite me to partake in, so the seeds are sown early on

MARK THOMAS KETTERSON talks to stage director Diane Paulus, whose visionary productions have helped define a new artistic profile for Chicago Opera Theater.



Robin Leggate and Adam Benkendorf as Quint and Miles in Paulus’ 2003 *Turn of the Screw*
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that musical and dramatic interpretation are intertwined.” Glover adds, “There is no dividing line between us. And although her ideas are always gloriously unexpected, there is complete musical fidelity.”



Paulus' 2003 production of *The Turn of the Screw* for Chicago Opera Theater:
Arianna Zuckerman as The Governess
© Liz Lauren 2006

For her superb staging of *The Turn of the Screw*, Paulus stripped the stage bare to the back wall, leaving the characters to wander surreally through a carpet of funereal white lilies; the resultant permeability of actual versus theatrical reality perfectly reflected the disintegration of the protagonist's mind, her haunting cries of “lost, lost” pealing with eerie poignancy in this created environment. In quite another vein, the cynical decadence of Nero's court in Monteverdi's *Poppea* was searingly captured by gilding the production with ostentatious, Vegas-inspired glitz; Seneca's death was splashed across the tabloids like so much glitterati gossip.

“The first job of a director,” Paulus says, “is to understand the context of a piece when it was originally performed. What was it like to be in the audience at *Poppea*'s premiere in 1642? Then you say, how can I recreate that experience for *our* audience, to make it feel pertinent to their lives? I always tell the anecdote – modern audiences sometimes have trouble with the countertenor, the young hunk who comes on and sings like a soprano. I made a parallel in the R & B world that opened it up for me – in R & B, when they flip into that falsetto, nothing could be sexier or more exciting. That is what interests me – creating productions that make audiences wake up, and not think that opera is ‘good for them’ but be shocked into thinking ‘I recognize myself, and I'm moved.’”

Her imagination innervates singers, who often embrace the risk. “I find the young singers now taking over the world's stages are extremely open to theatrical direction, sometimes even more than actors. They come to it so eager to be given a juicy theatrical motivation. And if singers understand that the director is coming from a place of musical integrity, they will join hands with you.”

As to the question of introducing young audiences to an old art form, the response of students to Paulus's production of *Le Nozze di Figaro* has been encouraging. (She staged it as a rough day at a bourgeois Miami condo, with text-message conspiracy and designer barware abounding.) “She turns it into real, modern music

theater,” says Dickie. “And she has that fantastic ability to take that mirror out and say, ‘This is you’ — to make audiences feel they are seeing themselves onstage, behaving as human beings do.”

“In a weird way,” Paulus reflects, “opera is *not* such an old art form. If you look at theater, that’s been around since ancient Athens and before, since the ritualistic roots of Indian culture. Opera.... Well, look at Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*. It’s only a few hundred years old. I find inspiration in that. We are only so far on the graph in terms of where this art form could go.”

Making a popular success of Monteverdi in today’s climate of cultural Darwinism is no mean achievement, and the temptation to wheedle a conceptual preview of *Il Ritorno d’Ulisse in Patria*, which Paulus will stage for COT in 2007, is impossible to resist. “The one hint I can drop,” she says, her eyes dancing with mischief, “is it’s the *return* of Ulysses — and I’m *very* interested in Penelope!” □

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