

# Changes in the sets of the Hungarian State Opera House from 1991 to 2016

Theses of the DLA thesis

The research topic of the DLA thesis is the changes in the scenery of the MÁO during the quarter century 1991-2016.

The main thesis of my DLA thesis is that there has been an epochal change in the theoretical/creative and technical level of scenic design during the period under study.

The process whereby the set designer not only creates the aesthetic playing field for the director's message, but also contributes to the interpretation of the director's concept by creating the visual world of the performance, had begun earlier, but became dominant on the stage of the MÁO during the period under study, 1991-2016

My method of evidence My research steps were as follows:

1. Defining the set, how an opera set differs from other sets.
2. The history of opera set design at the MÁO, its technical conditions in stagecraft and set design, and the great masters who created it in the period before.
3. I selected the main stage productions of the MÁO from the period I studied and analysed the important changes in set design between 1991 and 2016 through 5 selected performances.

Aspects of the analysis in the 5 performances:

- a) Brief historical overview
- b) Reasons for choosing the play
- c) The creative concept
- d) The role of the set / visual design in conveying and nuancing the director's message / reading
- e) The semantics of visuality in the performance
- f) The influence of contemporary art on the set / visual design
- g) The technical challenges of set / visual design, staging techniques, choice of materials as a source of inspiration
- h) Conclusion

The 5 performances have been selected to be very different in style and technique, and to be landmark performances in terms of set design and technical innovation in the period under study.

The performances examined and the conclusions I have drawn are as follows:

Alban Berg: *Wozzeck*

Premiere: 29 May 1992.

Director: Viktor Nagy

Set Designer: Csaba Antal

The set is a visual experience in itself, not only illustrating the dramatic scene, but creating a space that tells a story and makes the viewer think about it further.

All the rotating and moving elements, the proportions, the colours or lack of them, the lights and shadows, the lighting of the opening edges, the cold shimmer of the chrome nickel, the presence of water all add to the director's intention.

From a technical point of view, it is interesting because each element rotates separately, rotates as one, moves vertically and horizontally as one. The use of chrome nickel and water is new, it has not been used before.

Béla Bartók: *The Bluebearded Prince's Castle*

Premiere: 20 February 1993.

Director: Viktor Nagy

Stage designer: Imre Makovecz

Imre Makovecz's genius as a set designer lies in his ability to integrate and use symbols from myths, religion, ancient traditions and folk motifs. He connects the narratives and visual world of the past with the present and the future.

Through a highly creative use of ancient symbols, she creates a specific story where we can be at home in the world based on our common identity. Her organic style uses materials and motifs that are at once familiar from the past, and at the same time create an unusual yet reassuring relationship between the old and the new.

The appearance of Imre Makovecz's style on the stage of the Opera House was a revolutionary innovation from a visual point of view, and also in the sense that it represented a living tradition in the Opera House.

From a technical point of view, the excessive dimensions of the set and the construction-demolition-delivery time made it unsuitable for repertory staging.

Richard Wagner: Treasure of the Rhine

Premiere: 20 February 1993.

Director: Viktor Nagy

Set designer: Attila Csikós

Viktor Viktor Viktor Wagner, director of the theatre and director of the production.

The story of Niebelung, set in the underworld - earth - water - air - sky, is perfectly served by this opportunity.

Attila Csikós, set designer, had to come up with a set design that would be both coherent and technically suitable for the Ring's 4-night performances.

One new episode was presented each year, and in the fourth year he used the same laser, black lacquer floor and hydraulics as in the first part of the tetralogy, The Treasure of the Rhine.

Richard Strauss: Elektra

Premiere: 28 November 2007.

Directed by Balázs Kovalik

Set Designer: Csaba Antal

Balázs Kovalik's visionary operatic arrangements are a very important stage in the visual transformation that is taking place on the MÁO stage.

The setting of Elektra, which is in fact a one-room set with only the upper level moving, places the story in a modern, dried-up, waterless pool that makes purification impossible.

The dried-up bath/tomb is Elektra herself, unable to forgive, the palace level where constant bathing is the way for those who try to resume normal life to feel good. The tipping dome, which symbolises both conscience and the world out of control. And everyone dies, no one can get out of this situation intact.

Shortening the installation of the set requires a highly coordinated set design team effort.

Jean-Philippe Rameu: Hyppolite and Aricie

Premiere: 26 June 20013.

Directed by Csaba Káel

Set designer: Éva Szendrényi

Rameau's opera takes a fairy-tale approach to its theme, leading the viewer through worlds/ The World Beyond, The World of the Gods/ which allowed the creators to create an elemental, generous, cosmos-permeating, grandiose visual concept that creates a 3-dimensional universe on the MÁO stage, comparable to fantasy films.

Through set, costume, projection and lighting, the creators will create a surreal space where the entire drama is elevated to the stage of the Universe. The space becomes cinematic through the set, projection and lighting, a 3-dimensional film in which the rules of physics hardly apply.

## Conclusion

By analysing the performances, it has been demonstrated that in the period under study, the visual representation and the visual world of Hungarian opera performance moved from the reproductive form to a series of interpretative performances.

In Hungary, too, the process that had already taken place in the opera houses of Western Europe and the United States in the 1960s and 1970s was taking place.

The director chose a set designer for the performances as part of the director's concept, because the visual concept became an integral part of the director's message.

Thanks to the opportunities that opened up after the change of regime, Western visual art and aesthetic achievements reached the MÁO stage much more quickly.

Invitations from foreign artists were frequent (e.g. directors Helmut Schörghofer, Andrejs Zagars, G. de Bosio, Armand Bernard, Jirzi Menzel, M. Znaniecki, Stefano Poda), but many of our directors and set designers were also invited by foreign opera houses, so that interaction was also created.

The change of scenery has also been facilitated by the renewal of the MÁO's staging technology. Experimentation with sets became possible and internal workshop work flourished. As a result, a large number of varied set movements could characterise the performances (e.g. programmed movements with travel-time synchronisation, etc.).

Lighting, projection, animation and video technology have undergone major innovations.

New materials have appeared in the production of sets.

One of the reasons for these changes in the period I have been studying is the emergence of a demand from the public, which Udo Bermbach very aptly put it in 1996: 'The visualisation of the world and the individualisation of communication are developments which have a decisive impact on the self-image of modern societies and on the socialisation and education of the

younger generations, and which even have a significant influence on the behavioural styles of the older generations.'<sup>1</sup>

The above-mentioned processes are still taking place today and are likely to continue in the future, making this trend unstoppable.

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<sup>1</sup> UDO B E R M B A C H: THE OPERA OF THE FUTURE - COMMENTS FROM A POLITICAL SCIENTIST  
Theatre magazine, November 1996, p. 7