

BIBLICAL AND RELIGIOUS THEMES IN ROMEO CASTELLUCCI'S SELECTED OPERA AND MUSIC THEATRE STAGINGS

MICHAELA MOJŽIŠOVÁ

Institute of Theatre and Film Research,

Art Research Centre of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia

Abstract: This text deals with the opera (music theatre) stage performances of the Italian theatre maker Romeo Castellucci. The author calls attention to the artist's interpretation of operas or other works of music with a Biblical and religious background. On the example of four productions (Alessandro Scarlatti: *Il primo omicidio*, Richard Strauss: *Salome*, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *Requiem*, Arthur Honegger: *Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher*), she examines how Castellucci stages themes that form the objects of religious dogmas. In this study, the term dogma is not meant in a negative sense (i.e., as a limited, unilateral, manipulative interpretation), but is perceived in its original etymological sense, as a binding, normative statement in the field of faith.

Key words: Romeo Castellucci, opera theatre, religiousness, iconoclasm, directing interpretation

As a platform of artistic and social dialogue, contemporary scenic art reflects the situation in the world, defines the problematic spots in society, and reports on values and their relativity, on shortcomings, and disruption. At the same time, it has the potential to become a medium that seeks points of departure and sometimes comes up with an ambition to formulate moral postulates. One of the paths on which the artists set off in this quest is the analysis and (re-)interpretation of myths and archetypes that have been present in theatre as prototypes of human behaviour or models of characters ever since its beginnings. Contemporary opera theatre does not shy away from this, either. Theatre makers subject the codified formulas of reality to critical reading when they present works that are based on archetypal themes in interpretations that reflect the experience of present-day people and the world. Representatives of this staging philosophy include the well-known Italian theatre maker Romeo Castellucci, who has been increasingly profiling as an opera director ever since his début in the Brussels opera house La Monnaie in 2011 with a reference work of the world opera repertoire, Wagner's *Parsifal*. From 2011 to 2021, he staged twelve operas and works of music.¹ In 2014, he even received the Best Opera Director of the Year award from the prestigious German magazine *Opernwelt*.

In the context of Castellucci's previous dramatic and authorial works, it comes as no surprise that he is almost exclusively attracted to themes from ancient mythology, the Old and the New Testaments, and the history of Christianity even in dra-

¹ Richard Wagner: *Parsifal* (2011), Christoph Willibald Gluck: *Orfeo ed Euridice/Orphee et Eurydice* (2014), Morton Feldman: *Neither* (2014), Arnold Schönberg: *Moses und Aron* (2015), Johann Sebastian Bach: *Matthäus-Passion* (2016), Richard Wagner: *Tannhäuser* (2017), Arthur Honegger: *Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher* (2017), Richard Strauss: *Salome* (2018), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *Die Zauberflöte* (2018), Alessandro Scarlatti: *Il primo omicidio* (2019), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *Requiem* (2019), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *Don Giovanni* (2021).

matic works of music. The Polish theatre maker Dorota Semenowicz, author of the monograph *Theatre of Romeo Castellucci and Società Raffaello Sanzio. From Icon to Iconoclasm, from Word to Image, from Symbol to Allegory* (2016), notes that, from among the surviving cultural myths, the director is interested mainly in those which involve the "dialectic of death and resurrection, punishment and reward, martyrdom and redemption, good and evil."² All the above themes form part of Christian theology, but the director is evasive regarding his own religiousness. In one of his interviews where he was asked such a question, he mentions that he is not a Catholic and that Greek Orthodoxy is closer to his mentality but adds that "it is very personal and has nothing to do with shows."³

By his artistic (re-)interpretation of religious dogmas, i.e., binding, normative statements in the field of faith, Castellucci enters a very sensitive domain. His creations are accompanied by the notion of iconoclasm, or destruction of icons, in opposition to the Christian cult of icons and religious figures. That is also why the presentations of his stage performances that touch upon religious topics often encounter opposition from the faithful who feel hurt and threatened in their faith. In this respect, Castellucci's staging of *Sul concetto di volto nel Figlio di Dio* (2010) resonates most powerfully, as it was accompanied by massive protests along its journey through European festivals, while it provoked conflicting reactions from the clergy, from condemnation as blasphemy up to a conviction that it is a profoundly Christian performance. His opera stagings – except for Honegger's boisterously received *Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher* – did not provoke such strong response, although the director's interpretation of religious themes remained autonomous, emancipated from codified religious dogmas.

Cain and Abel

Alessandro Scarlatti's oratorio *Il primo omicidio* [The First Murder], which Castellucci staged in Opéra National de Paris⁴, was not his first scenic encounter with the Old Testament *Book of Genesis* or the story of Cain and Abel. His theatre company, Società Raffaello Sanzio, had produced a performance entitled *Genesi. From the Museum of Sleep* already in 1999, which was a suggestive stage meditation about the creation and destruction of the world (from the viewpoint of the victims of Auschwitz) and about hope for a new beginning. However, while it was an authorial project that provided a large amount of artistic freedom to the theatre makers, in the Paris staging, Castellucci's invention remained determined by the strictly defined musical dramatic layout of the oratorio in which Scarlatti expanded the four protagonists of the Biblical story (Cain, Abel, Adam, and Eve) with allegorical characters, the Voice of God, and the Voice of Lucifer.

The story of Cain and Abel is one of the most difficult Old Testament passages to interpret, but one of the most iconic ones, too. The fratricide that followed after God

² SEMENOWICZ, D. Skandal obrazu. O teatrze Romea Castellucciego [The Scandal of the Image. The Theatre of Romeo Castellucci]. In *Didaskalia*, 2011, Vol. 33, Issue 103 – 104, p. 36.

³ CASTELLUCCI, R. – CROMBEZ, T. Trois interviews de Romeo Castellucci sur la 'Tragedia endogonia'. [online]. [cit. 1 June 2021]. Available at: <https://tcrombez.wordpress.com/2008/05/25/trois-interviews-de-romeo-castellucci-sur-la-tragedia-endogonia/>.

⁴ Alessandro Scarlatti: *Il primo omicidio*, Opéra national de Paris, premiered on 24 January 2019. Conducted by René Jacobs, set design, costumes, lighting, and direction Romeo Castellucci.



Alessandro Scarlatti: *Il primo omicidio*. Opéra national de Paris, premiered on 24 January 2019. Direction Romeo Castellucci. Olivia Vermeulen (Abele), Kristina Hammarström (Caino). Photo © Bernd Uhlig.

had accepted the sacrifice offered to him by the shepherd Abel but ignored that of his brother, the farmer Cain, forms a controversial topic of theological disputes, in which the question arises whether it was not this decision of the Creator that triggered Cain's jealousy and resulted in the tragic act. The answer to this doubt is the argument that, although God's will is hard to understand, it always pursues the benefit of the creation. Therefore, when God chose Abel's sacrifice, it does not mean He did not intend good for Cain. However, in his impatience, Cain was unable to accept God's decision and wanted to gain his blessing at all costs. He did not direct his anger and frustration to God, but to his brother, Abel. While, till then, jealousy had been intrinsic only to the fallen angel Lucifer, from that moment onward it has been an integral part of the list of human sins.

Scarlatti's oratorio opens with the weeping of Adam and Eve, who had been expelled from paradise. Castellucci gave them a common civilian clothing. The graphically beautiful area with heavenly blue mist, inspired by the colourful light installations of James Turrell and Dan Flavin and by the large colourful patches of the American abstract painter Mark Rothko (with whom the director has been constantly leading creative dialogue), was no longer theirs – they were separated from Eden by a Gothic painting of the Annunciation, turned upside down.⁵ At the same time, the portal of the closed heavenly gate created a symbolic bridge between the mother of mankind, the first woman, Eve, and Jesus's mother, Mary. In their fates, certain paral-

⁵ It was a citation of the Gothic painting *L'Annunciazione tra i santi Ansano e Massima* by Simone Martini and Lippo Memmi, exhibited in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.



Alessandro Scarlatti: *Il primo omicidio*. Opéra national de Paris, premiered on 24 January 2019. Direction Romeo Castellucci. Olivia Vermeulen (Abele), Charles Le Vacon (Caino – child), Kristina Hammarström (Caino). Photo © Bernd Uhlig.

els may be discerned. Both listened – the first one to the serpent (the devil), the latter to Archangel Gabriel. Both experienced the devastating pain of losing their sons. According to an interview published in the bulletin, by turning the painting upside down, Castellucci wanted to evoke the shape of a guillotine and hint at the threat posed to Eve by her maternity. A similar anticipation of a looming tragedy could be also read in the scene where Abel, preparing his sacrifice depicted by a plastic bag filled with dark red liquid, spilled blood on his white shirt, and also in the scene that presented the ambivalent relationship of the two brothers, where it was hard to judge from their stylized wrestling alternating with hugs whether they were playing or fighting.

Castellucci's staging interpretation of the oratorio made it obvious that he did not identify with the presentation of God as infinite Good and Love. The Voice of God, whom he gave a physical form on the stage, was closer to the ancient than to the Christian understanding – He was capricious and cruel. First, he left Cain to the whispering Voice of Lucifer (who was also a physical character on stage) and then he not only rejected the burnt offering of the elder brother but extinguished it straight away with his coat. The aria in which the Voice of God condemns the first murderer in Biblical history to live the life of a fugitive was sung by this character with his legs stretched over the chest of writhing Cain.

Contrary to the abstract area of Act One, Act Two took place in a realistically modelled landscape with parched, rocky soil. Cain had to strenuously toil this land, with dry tussocks of grass, to make his living. However, the lost paradise was not far yet, the dark starry sky touched the earth. While the stylized movement of the performers



Alessandro Scarlatti: *Il primo omicidio*. Opéra national de Paris, premiered on 24 January 2019. Direction Romeo Castellucci. Lucie Larras (Eva – child), Arthur Viard (Abel – child). Photo © Bernd Uhlig.

in the first part evoked tableaux in the style of Robert Wilson, the second part used the motoric and expressive vocabulary of realistic acting. Nevertheless, Castellucci used dramatic stylization here, too: from the moment of Abel's death, the adult protagonists sang their parts in a raised orchestra pit or in the side boxes of the auditorium, while their places on the stage were taken by child actors as their alter egos. In this way, the director literally materialized on stage the theory of the contemporary Italian philosopher and aesthetician Giorgio Agamben, to whom he referred (not only) in this staging when he talked in an interview with the dramaturge Piersandra Di Matteo about the concept of history built on the "infantility" of events which cannot be handed down and are forever forgotten in tradition.⁶ In terms of this thesis, Cain's murder may be interpreted as a regressive act committed from infantile, selfish motives, which returned mankind into a phase of immaturity and unawareness, moving him away from God who had created the first man as his partner. In terms of the director's iconoclastic attitude, the fact that even the character of the Voice of God became a child can be interpreted as a regression of the Creator Himself, who caused this situation by his decision.

Castellucci gave the mark that God set upon Cain ("lest any finding him should not kill him," Genesis 4:15, NKJV) the form of a royal crown made of paper. The children took the crowned Cain among themselves and poked him and shoved him till a large, stuffed puppet fell from their circle. The puppet became smaller after each

⁶ See CASTELLUCCI, R. – DI MATTEO, P. Le sacré, la violence, le jeu. [Interview]. In *Alessandro Scarlatti: Il primo omicidio*. [Programme booklet]. Paris : Opéra national de Paris, 2018, p. 80.

round and, in the end, only a cloth ball with a crown (with Cain's mark) remained of it – in this abstract form, Cain became part of the stories of the subsequent generations.

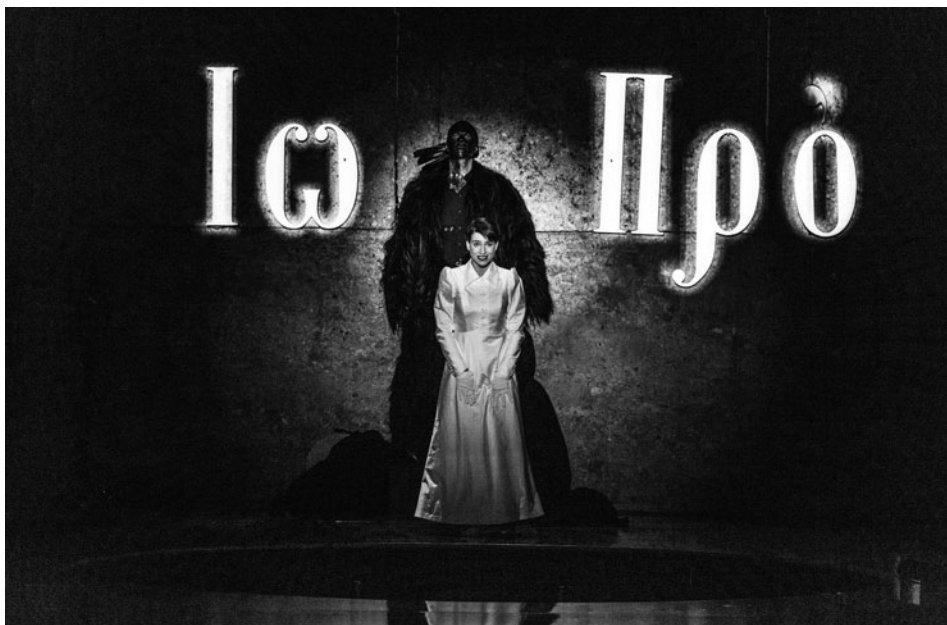
Just like in most of his other theatrical works, Castellucci ended the staging of Scarlatti's oratorio with a visually powerful point. With the final vocal number, the adult characters of Adam and Eve returned from the pit to the stage, which the character of the Voice of God had covered with an enormous piece of plastic, and he was desperately searching for his children. The emergence of the small doubles from under the cover had a cathartic effect: it symbolized the birth of a new progeny – the future of mankind.

John the Baptist and Salome

Contrary to the tragedy of Cain and Abel from the *Book of Genesis*, the story of the dancing daughter of the wicked Herodias, who asked for the head of John the Baptist from Herod the Tetrarch at her mother's request, is not a very relevant passage from a theological point of view. The New Testament (Matthew 14:3-11, Mark 6:17-29) does not mention the name of the girl at all; she was named only by the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius in his work *Antiquitates Iudaicae* [Antiquities of the Jews]. While the figure of John the Baptist – the last Old Testament prophet and the direct precursor and announcer of Jesus – is crucial for theology, the character of Salome has equally inspired the representatives of all types of arts (mainly from the nineteenth century onward). She is the title character of Richard Strauss's opera based on the most famous dramatic treatment of the theme, Oscar Wilde's one-act play, with which Castellucci debuted as a director at the prominent Salzburger Festspiele.⁷

Ever since its beginnings, the scenic tradition of this work, one of the first Literaturer (1905), has been developing mostly along the psychological analytical line, with the directors focusing on creating the profile of the title character and presenting the prophet mostly only as a catalyst that motivates her action. Castellucci, however, assigned equal significance to Jochanaan to that of Salome. Wearing a long black cloak, his head shaved, and with a drum with raven's feathers in his hand, his appearance did not resemble John the Baptist from Biblical images, but rather, he looked like a shaman. According to Castellucci, in Jochannan's world, spirituality is combined with corporeality and mysticism with animality. The director replaced the presence of the animal element, represented by the prophet's clothing of camel's hair, with the motif of a horse. In the semantics of symbols, the horse embodies animalism, but is also connected with death and departure to the afterlife. Christianity presents it also as a symbol of spiritual or military victory. In the pit, representing the tank in which Jochanaan was imprisoned, there were first cords tied from horsehair and then a live, black horse appeared. When the extras led Jochanaan out of the tank, they washed him as if he himself was a horse – they showered him with hoses, poured water on him from buckets, and groomed him with brushes until he acquired a "human" form. Then they tied two white fake human hands around him and led him back to his prison. The hands fell off and remained hanging on nails, evoking the torso of the

⁷ Richard Strauss: *Salome*. Salzburger Festspiele, premiered on 28 July 2018. Conductor Franz Welser-Möst, set design, costumes, lighting, and direction Romeo Castellucci.



Richard Strauss: *Salome*. Salzburger Festspiele, premiered on 28 July 2018. Direction Romeo Castellucci. Asmik Grigorian (Salome), Gábor Bretz (Jochanaan). Photo © Salzburger Festspiele/Ruth Walz.

crucified Christ whom Jochanaan preceded and, soon after this scene, he himself gave his life for declaring the moral law.

In Castellucci's interpretation, the last place of Jochanaan's prophetic mission, the court of King Herod, was a dark, repulsive, distressing spot. As the dramaturge of the staging, Italian theatre maker Piersandra Di Matteo, aptly pointed out with humour, Castellucci "assassinated" the premises of the Felsenreitschule in Salzburg. He unceremoniously blurred the specificities of the environment, which has inspired dozens of theatre makers since the time of Max Reinhardt: he stuffed the open arcs of the arcade of this former riding hall and created an opulent scenic monolith that was suffocating for the viewers as well as for the protagonists of the plot. He kept only two small doors in the corners of the enormous stage and carved pits into the floor, which Jochanaan was emerging from and disappearing in. The depressing atmosphere was enhanced also by the naked bodies of the prisoners wrapped in plastic, the shiny floor staining the cloths of the cleaners with blood, and the courtiers, the lower halves of whose faces were disfigured with red colour. The red faces of the men contrasted with the corpse-like green visage of Queen Herodias, who received in Castellucci's staging the form of a repulsive creature with the movements of an old, hysterical woman.

Salome, portrayed by the dramatically, physically and vocally highly skilled Lithuanian soprano Asmik Grigorian, looked in this environment as an apparition from the other world: tiny, slim, with short hair and a childlike face, looking like an angel in a long, chaste, white dress buttoned up to her neck. Only when she turned her back to the audience, a telling red stain became visible, shining on her dress at the height of



Richard Strauss: *Salome*. Salzburger Festspiele, premiered on 28 July 2018. Direction Romeo Castellucci. Asmik Grigorian (Salome) in the scene of *Dance of the Seven Veils*. Photo © Salzburger Festspiele/Ruth Walz.

her womb. The vehemence with which she demanded to see the imprisoned prophet evoked the obstinacy of a sexually abused child who instinctively feels where rescue might come from. Even her insistence to the lovestruck commander of the guards, Naraboth, had no erotic dimension, but rather resembled a little girl imitating the vices she saw in adults.

The central point of the Biblical story is Salome's dance, remoulded by Strauss into an orchestral number entitled *Tanz der sieben Schleier* [Dance of the Seven Veils]. The composer conceived the performance for which Salome compelled Herod to behead Jochanaan as a scene of refined simplicity and motoric austerity, arguing with the fact that the dancer was not a courtesan but a virgin of noble birth. In his interpretation, Castellucci went even further, up to complete ascesis. There was no dance whatsoever: the almost naked Salome remained curled up as a statue in an embryonic posture on the golden pedestal of the royal throne bearing the large inscription SAXA (stone). On the temporal ground plan of this exciting musical number, Castellucci physically demonstrated the thesis formulated in the bulletin by Piersandra Di Matteo: "Art, as the grasping of reality, must never be limited to the depiction of the obvious. Its noblest aim is to capture that which is not obviously present."⁸ In this case, the orchestra musically presented a refined dance which could not be seen on the stage.

Castellucci's complexly coded staging concept was untangled in the final scene, in the grand monologue of Salome, *Ah! Du wolltest mich nicht deinen Mund küssen las-*

⁸ DI MATTEO, P. Der Kopf und das Begehren. In *Richard Strauss: Salome*. [Programme booklet]. Salzburg : Salzburger Festspiele, 2018, p. 28.



Richard Strauss: *Salome*. Salzburger Festspiele, premiered on 28 July 2018. Direction Romeo Castellucci. Asmik Grigorian (Salome). Photo © Salzburger Festspiele/Ruth Walz.

sen, *Jochanaan!* [Ah! You would not let me kiss your mouth, Jochanaan!] The extras dragged to the stage a man's naked body in plastic, pulled it out of the cover, and made him sit on a chair. Instead of the head of John the Baptist, Salome received his headless torso and her desire remained definitively unachievable. There was no mouth to kiss and no eyes that would have fallen in love with her. Salome argued with the body, sat on its knees, and cuddled it. She tried to solve this desperate situation by setting the cut-off head of a horse on the mutilated neck, which had been placed at her feet by Herod, but it did not hold there. Salome's desperate desire to unite with Jochanaan, which the director had already declared by her effort to wear Jochanaan's harness, reached a cathartic point. The girl stepped into a small pit and settled in it in a way that only her head remained sticking out of an illuminated circle which clearly looked like a silver tray. In the suggestive graphic installation, Castellucci materialized his interpretation of the characters as he introduced it in an interview published in the bulletin: "Salome is the sexual victim of Herod, Jochanaan is the victim of Salome and, in the end, Salome becomes the victim of herself."⁹ At the same time, however, another interpretation of the cathartic moment opens up, which would correspond to the thesis presented in this study in the analysis of the staging of *Il primo omicidio*. It refers to points of departure and new beginnings, which the

⁹ CASTELLUCCI, R. – KAINBERGER, H. Der Blickfänger wird blitzen. [Interview]. In *Salzburger Nachrichten Spezial*, 2018, July, p. 6.



Richard Strauss: *Salome*. Salzburger Festspiele, premiered on 28 July 2018. Direction Romeo Castellucci. Asmik Grigorian (Salome). Photo © Salzburger Festspiele/Ruth Walz.

director opens in his stagings: by her physical identification with Jochanaan, Salome fulfilled the most profound essence of her desire.

Requiem Mass

Similarly to Scarlatti's oratorio, Mozart's *Requiem*, which Castellucci staged as his début at the opera festival in Aix-en-Provence¹⁰ on the courtyard of Théâtre de l'Archevêché, is not an opera, but a composition to be performed in a church. Mozart had not lived to complete his work and he fully authored only two parts, the *Introitus* and the *Kyrie*. He did not manage to orchestrate the other movements and some of them, including the famous *Lacrimosa*, remained sketches. Mozart's widow Konstanze first requested her husband's friend Joseph Eybler to finish the composition posthumously, but the request was ultimately fulfilled only by Mozart's student Franz Xaver Süssmayer, who was skilled in his master's style. Since Mozart's contribution to the work was unclear for a long time, the subsequent generations did not approach it as a sacred relic. Music history is aware of several attempts to complete the composition anew or to improve or replace Süssmayer's movements. The young French conductor Raphaël Pichon, responsible for the music rendering of Castellucci's staging in Aix-en-Provence, had a similar, non-rigorous approach. He intertwined the original

¹⁰ Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *Requiem*. Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, premiered on 3 July 2019. Conductor Raphaël Pichon, set design, costumes, lighting, and direction Romeo Castellucci.

fourteen numbers of Süssmayer's version with other miniatures, which Mozart had composed in his youth and which are rarely performed, and with Masonic songs, and opened and ended the composition with Gregorian chant performed by a boy soprano evoking a twenty-first-century Cherub. Nevertheless, as Pichon emphasized in the bulletin, his ambition was not to become a new completer of Mozart's work; the musical material he created made sense only for this particular project of Castellucci.

Mozart's *Requiem* is introvertly contemplative, distant both from the "lightness" of the composer's style and the monumental pathos of the other opuses of this genre. It provides scope for liberal, personalized interpretation. The work may be perceived from the position of faith in that physical death is a gateway to eternal salvation or, to the contrary, it may point to the acceptance of an inevitable, definitive end to existence. Castellucci did not conceive the opus as a requiem mass but as a meditation about the past and the future of mankind, utilizing various dissonances between consciousness and unconsciousness. According to Dorota Semenowicz, Castellucci is close to Nietzsche, who declared that there were no beautiful surfaces without a terrible depth.¹¹ Castellucci's concept of the *Requiem* may also be interpreted in line with Nietzsche's statement: The director presented the beauty that surrounds man along with its reverse side – its transience.

The production opens with a dramatic prologue accompanied by the angelic voice of a roughly seven-year-old member of the children's choir of the Paris Opera. The words of the Gregorian chant *Christus Factus est* come from the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Philippians: "[Christ] humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name." (Philippians 2:8-9, NKJV) On an empty stage, on which the props consisted only of a wooden bed with a bedside table and a television, a smoking old lady was watching the evening news. Then she sucked at an orange that was lying on the floor, extinguished her cigarette, and lay down on the bed. Until the boy finished singing, she disappeared from the view of the audience; the bed had engulfed her. After the gloomy tones of the Masonic hymn *Meistermusik*, black figures entered the black scene with black nets on their hair and black flags in their hands. They wrapped the bed, the table, and the still playing television in black sheets, and the choir adopted the posture of a cortège. The singers dressed in theatrically non-stylized civilian clothes sang *Miserere mei* [Have mercy upon me, O God] above the imaginary tomb of the old woman.

The funeral ended with the *Introitus*, the first number in the staging that truly belonged to Mozart's *Requiem*. A pretty woman stepped out of the crowd of the choir with a bouquet in her hand and put the orange on the covered bed smilingly. When the attendants lifted the bed, a young girl in a loose white dress fell off from inside and the inscription *Atlas des Grandes Extinctions* [Atlas of Large-scale Extinctions] appeared on the backdrop. Leafing through this encyclopaedia of extinctions became

¹¹ SEMENOWICZ, D. Skandal obrazu. O teatrze Romea Castellucciego [The Scandal of the Image. The Theatre of Romeo Castellucci]. In *Didaskalia*, p. 36. The statement, which is one of the most quoted ones of the author, comes from Nietzsche's foreword to Wagner and refers to the essence of Greek art. "[Uns hat die griechische Kunst gelehrt], dass es keine wahrhaft schöne Fläche ohne eine schreckliche Tiefe giebt; [...]." See NIETZSCHE, F. *Fragments 1869 – 1874, Band 1* [Februar 1871, Dokument: Mappe mit losen Blättern]. [online]. [cit. 15 June 2021]. Available at: <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/nietzsch/fragmen1/chap010.html>.

the main motif of Castellucci's concept: it said goodbye to objects and phenomena lost in the past eras and, at the same time, it called attention to those we might still lose. The names of extinct animals, plants, water bodies, ancestors of man, no longer existing religions, defunct, lost or destroyed monuments, works of art, cities, tribes, languages, etc. were projected onto the screen in quick succession throughout the performance. The untiring enumerativeness of the projected text resembled a Catholic prayer or litany. Some of the objects were so distant in time from the world of the audience sitting in the hall that they came across as abstract and impersonal. The prehistoric animals, ancient ferns, archaic -isms, cities or monuments from the pre-Christian eras did not arouse any emotions. Nevertheless, those closer to the world we live in came across as appealing: Pripyat, Chernobyl, Fukushima, the tower of the Notre-Dame in Paris¹², (...). One intertwined with the other as if they were selected by a random algorithm.

An important part of the staging included a roughly twelve-year-old girl: together with the old woman from the prologue and the young girl who fell off the old woman's deathbed, they could be associated with a three-generational incarnation of ancestress Eve. The pilgrimage of the child on stage was neither easy nor pleasant. During the second sentence of *Dies irae*, in which the trumpets call for the Last Judgement [Tuba mirum], two members of the choir painted her with colourful powdered paints from small bowls and hang her on a cardboard wall, inserting her hands into the cut-out openings. This act, which evoked a pagan sacrifice of a virgin, followed in the footsteps of Joseph Beuys in terms of his performative installations. They lifted the girl off the wall, poured honey and some red liquid on her head, and threw feathers and clay at her. Then they dressed her in a hooded black cloak and black fur, placed twisted mouflon's horns on her head and a stick in her hand, and expelled her from the stage with the passage "Ne perenni cremer igne" ("Let me not burn in the eternal fire"). This scene evoked the washing and the subsequent "crucifixion" of Jochanaan in *Salome*, with the difference that, in the *Requiem*, it was a reverse mirror version of the composition of the Salzburg scene.

The highly aestheticized staging initially appeared as a celebration of life rather than mourning over death. Evelin Facchini, who was in charge of the folklore part of the choreography, selected diverse elements predominantly from Slavic and Balkan nations, from solo and partner dances up to circle dances (khorovod) and round dances. The members of the Pygmalion choir performed these unartificially and authentically, without emotionally empty technical perfectionism. With the progression of the staging, however, the visually beautiful idyll got disturbed. The choir members smeared black clay over the floor with their own bodies and the whiteness of their clothes disappeared under the dirt stains. They acted like crawling worms and three naked old men passed through them with sticks in their hands. The latter appeared to be cavemen: they lit a fire in the back corner of the stage and stood around it. As it was extinguished, the stage became pitch-dark. When it was illuminated again, the choir had changed its clothes into exotic-looking costumes and the choreography shifted from Slavic provenance eastward. A frail man joined the singers/dancers; with his bare chest, beard, and dark hair tied with a rubber band, he strongly resembled

¹² The festival premiere of *Requiem* took place shortly after the fire in this Paris church.

Jesus. The choir members seized him, wrapped him into a white sheet, and placed him on the lap of one of the female members of the choir.¹³ Then they lifted him, tied his hands behind his back with colourful ribbons, and made him kneel with his back to the audience. In the meantime, the dancers erected a pole with ribbons and, in front of the eyes of the meek Jesus, with the *Hostias* (the hymn sung in the Catholic Holy Mass during the offertory) being sung, they braided the ribbons and wrapped them around the pole to which they subsequently ritualistically bowed. Similarly to the other scenes in his staging, Castellucci left scope for free interpretation to emancipated viewers in spirit of their own world view or cultural experience. A believer may even have perceived this mise-en-scène as a stage metaphor of the rejection of the Redeemer or of bowing down to pagan idols. At the same time, as usual, he attacked the limits of the audience, both emotionally and rationally.

Castellucci visually filled the *Benedictus*, the longest movement of the *Requiem*, with scenes depicting the stylized movements of the victims of car accidents dying on the slammed hoods of car wrecks, installed under a huge copper monstrosity. This lent a new dimension to the encyclopaedia of extinctions. The names of things that had disappeared in the course of human history were no longer projected onto the back screen. Instead, the names of objects and phenomena that form part of present-day life appeared there, but this does not mean that mankind cannot lose them, and do so even this very moment: Théâtre de l'Archevêché, the nocturnal chirping of crickets, the word for, and the awareness of, one's self, (...). The feeling of transience gradually became palpable. The monstrosity pulled off from the stage revealed an empty, dirty wall, under which injured choir members were lying in two rows. Further words were projected on this wall: disappearance of Christianity, of movement, of water, of thirst, of literature, of aesthetics, of this music, (...). In the given moment, music truly ceased in an orchestral general pause that filled the amphitheatre of Théâtre de l'Archevêché with silence.

The subsequent *Agnus Dei* of the *Requiem* sings about the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world. During this movement, the choir members remained covered with a semi-transparent black elastic fabric, from under which they were rescued by the pilgrim girl returning to the play. When the soprano took off her animal robe, the members of the choir also emerged from the blackness. Their suffering on stage, however – contrary to the similarly “cursed” children of Adam and Even in the Paris staging – did not end yet. During the soprano solo in the *Communion* movement, they took off their white costumes and became naked, or were wearing body-colour underwear that made them appear naked. A pile of clothes remained lying on the floor, with a bunch of people shyly scrunched up above them, trying to cover themselves with white bands of paper stripped off the walls. Above this desperate scene, evoking images from concentration camps, the date of this festival show was projected as a large exclamation mark.¹⁴

If the staging had ended in that moment, with the slowly departing, miserable members of the choir and the devastated stage, it would have been a depressing full

¹³ The profoundly emotional scene of the Christian Pietà is a recurring motif in Castellucci's works. A similar scene formed part also of the Paris staging of Scarlatti's oratorio, and of a recent theatre work of the director, *Democracy in America* (2017).

¹⁴ In the case of the repeat performance I attended, it was 13 July 2019.

stop. However, the floor unexpectedly rose into a vertical position and all the dirt that had accumulated on it slowly slid to the proscenium (the audience had the impression that it was pouring on them). The little cherubim from the prologue reappeared in front of the audience and the musical composition ended with the Gregorian chant *Ins Paradisum*, which used to be sung at the end of Catholic funerals as the last farewell to those who were about to enter the gates of paradise and be welcomed there by the angels. Accompanied by his heavenly voice, women of four generations entered the stage (a motherly, plump woman joined the trio already familiar to the audience – the old woman from the beginning of the performance, the young girl, and the adolescent girl), and they brought along an infant boy, less than a year old. The girl carefully set his mat, the mother placed him on it, and they all left together. The cherubim finished singing, the courtyard of Théâtre de l'Archevêché became silent, and the child, with a plastic toy, remained toddling on the stage as the symbol of a new beginning. In creating a cathartic staging moment, which is always essential to Castellucci's works, the director again preferred the emotion of hope to that of a disaster (typical for his non-opera works). The similarity of the endings of the productions of *Requiem* and *Il primo omicidio* may support the thesis formulated here, namely that hope is a leitmotif in Castellucci's opera/music direction.

Saint Joan of Arc

At the beginning of this study, we mentioned the opposition of the faithful with respect to the performances of the *Sul concetto di volto nel Figlio di Dio* project. Public protests against Castellucci's blasphemous approach also accompanied his staging of the scenic oratorio *Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher*, staged as a co-production of the opera theatres of Lyon, France, and Brussels, Belgium.¹⁵ The director was systematic in his deconstruction of the myth of Joan of Arc: he questioned her nationalistic, cultural, religious, and feminist aspects. In her dramaturgical notes published in the bulletin of the production, Piersandra Di Matteo specifies: "When Romeo Castellucci extracts Joan from history, he uncovers how she is trapped in the ideological layers and other propagandist distortions that have sedimented over time around her figure. While the different interpretative currents – the fruits of their time – constitute an interesting material for the historian just as much as the story of Joan herself, it appeared important to us in this staging to adopt a tactic of meticulous dissociation. He makes sure to put an end to all the reliquaries that sanctify Joan as a celestial heroine: to hagiography which portrays her as a pure madwoman with unshakeable faith, to mythology which makes her a victim of "political reasoning," to the perspective which promotes her representation as a possessed and bellicose Erynys in deliberate contrast with the virginal image of a poor, illiterate shepherdess. Above all, it is about making Joan dismount from her heroic pedestal (and her celestial throne)."¹⁶

¹⁵ Arthur Honegger: *Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher*. Opera Nouvel, Lyon, premiered on 31 January 2017, Théâtre de la Monnaie Brussel, premiered on 5 November 2019 (co-production). Conductor Kazushi Ono, set design, costumes, lighting, and direction Romeo Castellucci.

¹⁶ DI MATTEO, P. *Jeanne d'Arc, ou le théâtre des voix*. Notes sur la mise en scène de Romeo Castellucci. In Arthur Honegger: *Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher*. [Programme booklet]. Brussels: La Monnaie/Le Munt, 2019, p. 33.

The scenic oratorio *Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher* was composed by Arthur Honegger, a Swiss Lutheran, who set to music the text of Paul Claudel, a French Catholic. Their muse, the inspirer of the work and the title character in the first shows, including its world premiere in Basel (1938), was Ida Rubinstein, a Russian dancer of Jewish origin. The ecumenical creative background influenced the literary and musical form of the work. Without any epic descriptiveness, the symbolist Claudel conceived the libretto as a vision of the sentenced Joan who, face to face with death, replays the important moments of her life in her head. However, they do not take place chronologically, but in a reversed succession, starting with the unjust proceeding in Rouen, through the coronation of Charles VII in Reims, up to her childhood in the small village of Domrémy in Lorraine. In the last of eleven scenes, she arrives at the finding that the essence of her life lies in her faith in God and in love – it is thanks to this faith that she will be able to face the suffering of martyrdom.

Claudel's rich language works with both rhythmicized prose and metrical verse, folk dialects and wrong Latin (spoken by the hypocritical prosecutors), parody and fine lyricism. Besides the dramatic characters of Joan and her comforter, friar Dominique, a large mixed and children's choir and a sextet of soloists also perform in the oratorio, and they reincarnate into several characters. However, in Castellucci's staging, none of the singing protagonists appeared on the stage: both the soloists and the choir were covered by the darkness of the side boxes and the upper balcony, by which he physically "dematerialized" the visions of Joan and the voices of saints.

As an upbeat to Honegger's/Claudel's score, the director inserted a roughly fifteen-minute pantomime dramatic introduction into the staging. In an ultrarealistic, ramshackle classroom with furniture from the period of World War II, when the myth of Joan of Arc grew stronger in France and acquired nationalistic and political connotations, the lesson had ended. The female teacher and the schoolgirls in uniforms left the room and a thin, limping warden, with a cleaning trolley, entered the stage. First, he slowly wiped the desks, then he carried the furniture out to the corridor with great effort. The deconstruction of the place culminated in frenetic demolition, which made it clear that the man had mental issues. Ultimately, he stripped a blackboard and a hanging lamp off the wall and barricaded himself in the empty classroom. One of the chandeliers blinked and the space (of the man's head as well as of the theatre hall) was filled with the voices of an invisible choir, singing the first bars of the score: "Dark night! Dark night!"

In the second scene of Honegger's oratorio, Brother Dominique comes to the sentenced Joan. In Castellucci's staging, he was the headmaster who fulfilled the role of a negotiator until the police, who had been called, straightened out the confused warden. In the course of this scene, the ugly, neurotic man "metamorphosed" into a slim, charismatic woman – French actress Audrey Bonett, who became a congenial interpreter and partner of the director's conception. Nudity, against which the opponents of the staging protested, objecting to "pornography" and "obscenity" (while many adopted this attitude only based on third-hand information, without seeing the actual staging), was desexualized and chaste. Rather than the physiognomy of her body, the audience could perceive the actress's bare soul, revealed in a suggestive throat alto as well as in an intense, physically extremely demanding rendition, bordering at certain instances on self-destruction. At the same time, with respect to the male physiognomy of the title character, a parallel arises at the beginning of the



Arthur Honegger: *Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher*. Opera Nouvel, Lyon, premiered on 31 January 1977, Théâtre de la Monnaie Brusel, premiered on 5 November 2019 (co-production). Direction Romeo Castellucci. Photo © Bernd Uhlig.

production with an actual event in the life of Joan of Arc, who went to the court of Charles VII in Chinon disguised as a man.¹⁷ As if, after taking off this forced male identity, it were nudity that became a means of the purity, innocence, and the exposed identity of the personality of Joan.

Just like all the works of Castellucci, this one was also characterized by an ambiguity of the symbols and provided ample scope to the audience members for individualized interpretation. In the faded, almost unrecognizable colours of the cloth in which Joan wrapped herself as in a cloak, the French tricolour could be discerned. On the greyed flag, there were two intersecting lines, as if burnt by a sword which the warden had dug out from the clay from under the shredded, shattered floor. Association with the cross of Christian knights may have arisen, but the brown colour smeared over it greatly resembled excrement. The white, quilted fabric hanging from the dirty walls of the classroom demolished by the warden might as well have been the upholstery in a psychiatric cell, or the tapestry in a mediaeval castle. The initials of the name of the actress playing the title character (A B), written on a white sheet in the graphic form of a christogram, evoked an association of Joan with Jesus. From under this unstable wall, the actress pulled a hardly breathing, realistically looking but fake white horse that was dying. When she sat astride the back of the lying animal, she resembled a typical statue of Joan, a monument of a courageous amazon, but one that had collapsed.

¹⁷ Accusation of the sexual perversity of transvestism was one of the charges raised against her in the lawsuit in Rouen.



Arthur Honegger: *Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher*. Opera Nouvel, Lyon, premiered on 31 January 2017, Théâtre de la Monnaie Brusel, premiered on 5 November 2019 (co-production). Direction Romeo Castellucci. Photo © Bernd Uhlig.

Contrary to the previous staged performances analysed in this text, *Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher* did not end with a scene that might have provided an obvious, liberating catharsis to the audience. Instead of the flames, Joan was engulfed by black soil; she disappeared in a pit that had stayed there after the excavated sword. When the police finally broke the door open, they found the classroom empty. But that is what Christ's tomb was like, too – and then, for all those who believed, there was resurrection. Secularly thinking audience members may have got the point as the critic Beate Langenbruch: "And the grave that Joan digs for herself with her own hands, and into which her body finally disappears, also encloses innumerable misappropriations by history books and various ideologies."¹⁸

However, we may get closest to the interpretation of the point of *Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher*, and to the essence of Castellucci's theatre perception of religious themes, if we apply the statement of the French musicologist Timothée Picard to both. In a text inspired by Castellucci's staging of Mozart's *Requiem*, he wrote: "The West is marked by its break with God, one that, paradoxically, gave rise to theatre. Indeed, theatre resulted from the death of God, the moment when sacrifice was no longer possible. Hence, the director is mindful of so-called negative theology: the attempt

¹⁸ LANGENBRUCH, B. Joan Laid Bare and Buried: Romeo Castellucci Has Done with the Era of Appropriations of the Mythical Figure. In *bachtrack.com*, 10 February 2017. [online]. [cit. 4 June 2021]. Available at: <https://bachtrack.com/critique-jeanne-arc-au-bucher-romeo-castellucci-kazushi-ono-audrey-bonnet-denis-podalydes-opera-lyon-fevrier-2017>.

to approach God through his absence, to say what he is by saying what he is not. According to Castellucci, 'You can best speak to God when you think he does not exist.'"¹⁹

Conclusion

Romeo Castellucci's works, including his stagings of opera and music theatre works, represent an intensive contribution to contemporary debates about the relationship (or rather, conflict) between creative artistic freedom and respect for religion. In her study *Quando lo 'scandalo' diventa provocazione* [When 'Scandal' Becomes Provocation], the Italian culturologist Monica Jansen notes that it is the artistic productions that thematise the differences between secular and religious interpretations that provide the possible scenarios for solving the arising tension: "Since art is a privileged medium for giving a 'sensational form' to religion, aesthetics becomes an ideal field for analysing in which cases the artistic configuration corresponds to the religious context of a tradition or group, and when instead it is experienced as a 'blasphemous act.'"²⁰ In Castellucci's understanding, staging is always sort of a mystical ritual. However, this view is connected with his understanding of theatre performance rather than with an effort to reinterpret religious dogmas: he uses ritualisms only in connection with their paradigmatic nature to achieve a certain dramatic effect. Contrary to several contemporary opera makers, Castellucci is never unequivocal or schematic. Although it might appear so at first glance, he does not achieve the intensity of the artistic interpretation by being scandalous, but by autonomous theatre tools. That is also why his stagings of works with religious or Biblical themes have the power to impress and provide a cathartic experience to a wide range of audiences, regardless of their world view or religious affiliation.

Translated by Monika Dorna

This study is an output of the VEGA 2/0110/19 Poetics of Contemporary Performance Art project.

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¹⁹ PICARD, T. The Sacred According to Romeo Castellucci. [online]. [cit. 4 June 2021]. Available at: <https://festival-aix.com/en/blog/news/sacred-according-romeo-castellucci>.

²⁰ JANSEN, M. Quando lo 'scandalo' diventa provocazione. Il postsecolare e il teatro iconoclasta di Romeo Castellucci. In *Incontri*, 2020, Vol. 35, Issue 2, p. 41.

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Michaela Mojžišová
 Ústav divadelnej a filmovej vedy CVU SAV
 Dúbravská cesta 9
 841 01 Bratislava
 Slovakia
 e-mail: michaela.mojzisova@savba.sk