

Water and Fire: Biblical Dimensions of a New Production of *Nabucco*

Nabucco, Giuseppe Verdi.

2nd August 2013. Macerata Opera Festival, Arena Sferisterio.

This intellectual production of Verdi's *Nabucco* created a commentary on the plot by thrusting the natural elements of water and fire into the foreground by utilising all the technical artillery of the amazingly long Sferisterio stage flanked with a stone wall.

The highly original stage set and scenery, by Roberto Tarasco, placed thousands of plastic water bottles on the stage, used to represent walls, cities, and other architectural features, often used as barriers to be broken down, removed or slowly adapted. The recycled nature of the set with its reference to the strongest natural element provided a strong visual metaphor for this production, which resonated well throughout this four act opera. The placing of individual red flowers within each bottle gave a wonderfully rich red colour palette to the stage, which easily wheeled in and out of the scene, on the long Sferisterio stage. The colour palette was dominated by long red lines during the bass monologue and scenes of friction and trauma, in comparison to the white circular glow of the hand held lights during the Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves. The biblical tone of the story was thrust into the twentieth century with motor homes and vehicles used on the impressive Sferisterio stage: refugees, asylum seekers, families in time of trauma and political systems project a proposition to the spectator to question the actions that unfold on stage.

This contemporary version of *Nabucco* integrated video projection. At the start, a video set the location and ethnic scene within which the story is set, showing individuals, groups of people and flags.

With effective use of lighting, the water bottles were covered with fabric and lit, revealing a miniature city at the centre of the stage. The scale and malleability of this set was remarkable. The sheet, covering the miniature city, was raised to hang from the stone wall, as a backdrop for further projection. With the stage set featuring water, the video featured fire. The brutality of the story and the assurance of the natural elements underpinned the entire performance.



Nabucco, Act 1

The impressive soprano role for Abigail, sung by Virginia Tola, was seamlessly fluent. Despite the busy stage setting, and massive outdoor auditorium, her tone, intonation and articulation projected effortlessly, giving her character a strong assured quality, which perfectly projects her desire to gain the throne of Babylon in Act 2. This role is often a concern for many opera singers, due to its dexterity and vocal range. In tonight's performance Tola matched the strength of the natural elements, visually represented on stage, with her powerful tone, wide range, and wonderfully balanced phrasing.



Water bottles with individual flowers

An even greater thrill in this performance was provided by the baritone Alberto Mastromarino, as Nabucco. With a bold, agile, clear baritone voice, he was able to match his visual entrance working his way through the crowd in Act 2 with a vocal declamation that he has seized the crown. Mastromarino's diction was exceptional: in an effort to pose the

forthright nature of his character, and in Act 3 an insane dimension to the role, across the expansive stage, he projected out to all angles of the auditorium. In a theatre known for its efforts in fostering accessibility, the surtitles were perfectly cued to his performance, and though they served as a support for his text, the hearing audience hardly needed them. The agility and ease with which he used his articulation made the rhythms of the text fly from the stage. His declaration that the Israelites are free cuts across the orchestra with a timbre akin to the brass section.

This contemporary, commanding, accessible and highly energized performance offered a fresh interpretation of Verdi's much loved *Nabucco*. Its internal commentary, staged via complex and highly detailed props, video projection and subtitled subheadings, gave additional depth to a well-known and well-loved Verdi favourite.

Helen Julia Minors
2013