



| Opera Africa's production of *Aida*

Staging opera

The opportunity was too good to miss: an interview with Laurence Dale, who is back in town for the preparation of Opera Africa's premiere in October of *La Tragédie de Carmen* at the Market Theatre. CLASSICFEEL's Lore Watterson caught up with Dale over dinner and a very drinkable shiraz.

It is easy to talk with Laurence Dale. He is no stranger to South Africa, having directed the very successful Opera Africa productions of *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* in 2006 and *Aida* in 2008. He also conceived and staged *Opera Extravaganza* in 2007, an evening of the most beautiful music from the greatest operatic masterpieces sung by the crème of South African voices. The opera director knows that budgets are

tight, that passion runs deep and that audiences in South Africa need to be wooed.

Over our meal, I ask him how he manages to produce sold-out performances like *Aida*, Verdi's opulent masterpiece, on a shoestring budget? Dale does not take the credit himself, praising instead the performers, the choir – the whole team. The production starred Indra Thomas, the international soprano, whose signature



| Violina Anguelov as Amneris and the Opera Africa Chorus

role of *Aida* has met with critical acclaim on many of the world's stages. Dale shares with me that a singer like Thomas can make an incredible difference to a production. *Aida* had initially opened in Pretoria with Serbian-born soprano Katarina Jovanovic singing the lead role, but it had simply not worked. The change meant popular and critical success for this production of *Aida*.

For *Aida* Dale had teamed up with stage designer Dipu Gupta, renowned South African artist Andrew Verster and lighting designer Declan Randall, while Dutch conductor Vincent de Kort made his South African debut leading the Johannesburg Philharmonic Orchestra (JPO).

Dale is full of praise for the JPO and the commitment of its members, saying that the JPO gave him one of his most rewarding experiences ever. One performance, for reasons beyond anyone's control, found the JPO without a conductor and so Dale himself stood in. This was no mean feat as Dale had never conducted an orchestra before, but the JPO gave him their full support and together they pulled it off. It must have helped that he had gained a considerable international reputation as a lyric tenor, singing in many of the world's most important theatres and collaborating with many prestigious conductors and stage directors, before realising a life-long dream of staging operas.

In the early years of this decade, when Dale decided to give up his singing career to return to his first ambition of

directing opera, he was invited to direct Lehár's *Der Zarewitsch* and *The Land of Smiles* for the Operetta Festival, Bad Ischl. These productions are today still close to his heart and were followed by more controversial French and world premieres such as Thomas Adès' *Powder Her Face* at Nantes. New York's audiences praised his *Les malheurs d'Orphée* by Milhaud and Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, which played to sold-out houses. His season as the Artistic Director of l'Opéra Théâtre de Metz was met with the highest praise from national as well as international commentators.

Now Laurence Dale presents *La Tragédie de Carmen* at the Market Theatre. Dale is celebrated as having created the role of Don José in Peter Brook's famous *La Tragédie de Carmen* in 1981 at the Bouffes du Nord, Paris. So what better man to ask all about this forthcoming production than Dale himself?

Of all the interpretations across music, dance, film and theatre of Prosper Mérimée's 1845 story about the gypsy Carmen, it is Georges Bizet's opera of 1875 that is the most famous and has become one of the most frequently performed operas of all time. Even the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that *Carmen* revealed more about the nature of desire than all of Wagner's operas put together, as Dale points out.

The story of Carmen has been told in films like 1948's *The Loves of Carmen*, directed by Charles Vidor and starring Rita Hayworth



Delavault played Carmen and Dale José



Laurence Dale directs Opera Africa's production of *La Tragédie de Carmen*

and Glenn Ford, while the 1954 Otto Preminger film starred Harry Belafonte and Dorothy Dandridge, whose songs were performed by the young Marilyn Horne. When Oscar Hammerstein presented the musical *Carmen Jones* on Broadway in 1943, it was an instant hit and the signature tune for the gypsy dance that opens Act II, 'Beat out dat rhythm on a drum', was played everywhere.

The original Bizet version was written as an *opéra comique* with spoken dialogues, but when Bizet died shortly after the premiere the dialogues were replaced by Ernest Giraud's recitatives. With that it entered the stage as grand opera. However, it was the original version written by Bizet that English

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director Peter Brook wanted to recreate when he presented his version, *La Tragédie de Carmen*, in Paris in 1981.

Peter Brook had his own theatre, the Bouffes du Nord, in a seedy district close to the Gare du Nord, and had built up his own style of drama that was direct, intimate and challenging. Dale is still to this day incredulous that Brook chose him from among the many famous and experienced singers who also auditioned for the role. Dale, by his own account, was 'young and very young-looking, inexperienced – hardly out of my studies, non-French speaking' and never imagined he had a chance. But Peter Brook knew what he wanted and the role of Don José made the singer's name.

Brook shaped the new version of the story of Carmen for the limited space in his theatre together with playwright Jean-Claude Carrière and composer Marius Constant. By retaining much of Bizet's music, while re-orchestrating it and reducing the dramatis personae to four singers and two actors, Brook returned emphatically to the realism of Mérimée's novella. Dale explains that Brook's José is closer to Mérimée's in that by the end he has several deaths to account for, not just the murder of Carmen.

La Tragédie de Carmen in Johannesburg? What can the audience expect from Dale's own production? He is, at the time of the interview, in the middle of preparations and has seven weeks left of rehearsals with much still to be decided. He talks about the obsession that Peter Brook had with all things African and Dale wonders 'How can we Africanise this African production without being patronising? Is introducing drums wrong?' On the other hand, at the time of Mérimée's story Spain was considered exotic and remote, and Bizet's *Carmen* coincided with Napoleon III's marriage to a Spanish princess that saw all things Spanish suddenly become the rage.

Dale is full of praise for the South African cast that he is busy working with and his enthusiasm is clear. By his own admission he gets bored easily and a new challenge like this is what he thrives on. Clearly one challenge for the performers is to master the text in French and when Dale says 'master' he means it. He expects his singers to put the emphasis on the right syllables – and to demonstrate his point Dale breaks into a 'flat' 'Nessun Dorma' versus the real 'double consonant' 'Nessun Dorma' right here in the middle of the restaurant, where his beautiful tenor voice carries beyond the general chatter of its guests. Needless to say the clientele is fascinated.

The rehearsals are to continue while Dale returns to Europe and we agree to meet again on his return for the final rehearsals. I, for one, cannot wait for *La Tragédie de Carmen* to premiere at the Market Theatre, since after all it was Bizet's *Carmen* that introduced me to the wonderful world of opera at a very young age. **CF**