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Analysis of Acting and Design Elements in Chicago Opera Theater Performance of Monteverdi's *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria*

A Research Paper

by

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for

Professor Siobhan Moroney

Ways of Knowing

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Analysis of Acting and Design Elements in Chicago Opera Theater Performance of Monteverdi's *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria*

Darkness: total, encompassing, encircling darkness. Then, from the surrounding black and silence, came two thin, ominous, stringed musical notes of the theorbo instrument that seemed to herald, if not some portent of doom, certainly not tidings of joy, either. And then she emerged: a woman with short, straight black hair in a plain black dress. She stood for a few moments alone on the stage in the spotlight, gazing out at the audience with what seemed to be a mixture of hopelessness, desperation, and a curious kind of veiled dignity. After a few moments, she slowly turned from her viewers and began to ascend the impressive set, leaving the audience with the striking memory of that arresting stare.

As it was with this dramatic opening, in many instances of the Chicago Opera Theater's March 26 dress rehearsal of Claudio Monteverdi's *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* ("The Return of Ulysses"), a character's silences often communicated much more than his or her actual lines. To the more perceptive audience members familiar with Homer's *Odyssey*, the conclusion of which Monteverdi retells in his opera, this significant opening gaze reveals much about the character's state of mind. Clearly, this is a woman who knows her own heart and mind very well; she is a woman who, to protect herself, has carefully cultivated an outer covering of steel—an emotional shield that nothing short of the intervention of Mount Olympus can hope to crack. Her expression somehow conveyed both an abject bitterness and a stifled hope: the latter, we assume, because she has not yet given up on her husband; the former, because she fears that he may never return and that she will never have the chance or the inclination to love again. Therefore, from her appearance alone, the audience knows that this is the steadfastly loyal wife of Ulisse, Penelope. Brilliant acting and staging nuances such as these, together with the contemporary unit set, more modern costumes, and revamped Baroque music, helped to craft in "The Return of

Ulysses" a refreshingly unique and very enjoyable operatic adaptation of Homer's time-tested epic.

This phenomenon of retelling ancient stories and fables from alternate points of view is a fairly modern one, and has been used with great success in many different entertainment venues. More recently, it seems popular to retell Homer's *Odyssey* in particular; the reuniting of Odysseus with his family has frequently interested authors, directors, and producers. James Joyce's *Ulysses,* Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopeiad,* and even the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, to briefly name a few, are examples of twentieth-century variations on the ancient oral poem. Though there is no question that Monteverdi's opera is certainly a depiction of the *Odyssey*, it appeared to be merely an interpretation of books thirteen through twenty-four of the original text (*2007 Spring Season* 7). Despite the promising beginning that gave the audience a privileged view of her character, there was little in the opera to suggest that it was entirely or even mostly from Penelope's perspective.

However, although there was a definite discrepancy between my expectations for the production and the actuality, this hindered my enjoyment very little overall. Unlike the original *Odyssey*, in "The Return of Ulysses," Penelope was given more onstage time, and the emotional distress she faces was explored more in-depth. Performed by French mezzo-soprano Marie Leonormand, Penelope was portrayed as more *human* overall, snarling some of her lines when angry, tearing at her hair when frustrated, hugging herself for comfort, ever-reserved in front of the suitors and her servants until very last moment when she recognizes her husband's identity. Unlike a handful of the other characters in the opera, Penelope had little help in the way of an elaborate costume. She wore merely a long, sleeveless black dress with thick bracelets around both of her wrists. Her chin-length, straight black hair was something of a surprise to me; I suppose I had expected her to look like her servants, with long, sometimes curly hair, and certainly not black. However, in retrospect, this costume choice by Costume Designer Candice Donnelly was a wise one: on the almost blindingly white set, the effect of having Penelope wear very dark clothing and have dark hair meant that the audience immediately noticed her; she "[held] our attention with her dark eyes and mood" (Patner Features) and gave us the impression that she is in mourning (presumably for Ulisse). When juxtaposed with her maids, such as Melanto, and the suitors, most of whom were wearing bright white or other colorful clothing, the implication is that only she and a few choice others are actually moved that the king of the household is missing and presumed dead.

For the majority of the three-hour performance, Penelope remains in this apparel. When she does change her attire, however, the scene is usually significant (or, in the case of the second change, the climax of the opera). Penelope is the only character to appear partially nude onstage, as in the bathing scene where she has her back to the audience but is obviously topless. This is a crucial scene for the maid Melanto, who wants to convince her mistress to yield to the suitors so that she and her lover, Eurimaco, will have a chance to be together. It is also, however, a pivotal scene for Penelope because the arguments Melanto presents are logical and convincing, and in effect Penelope's head and heart must do battle within her: reading the scene in this way, Penelope's head tells her that she should listen to her maid, but her heart advises that she should continue to hold out and wait for her husband to return. As students of the *Odyssey* know, she picks her heart and clings stubbornly to her belief that either Ulisse is coming back or, if he is dead, that she will never love again. This scene is critical in part because is a choice she will continue to make—and defend—throughout the rest of the opera. Director Diane Paulus's staging decision to have this scene set in the bathing chamber can give rise to several symbolic interpretations. Perhaps the intent behind this choice was to indicate that in this scene Penelope was metaphorically “baring” her soul or inner character to the audience and to her maids by going without clothing. Another interpretation is that since she was bathing, at this moment Penelope had temporarily shed her outer shield; she had let her guard down and was thus more vulnerable to attack. This is something of a sad interpretation because it suggests that Penelope can never have an unstressed moment, not even in a private (for a queen) moment in the bath; she must always be ready to defend her way of thinking and be impervious to doubters, who may be as close to her as her own maids.

Although it may seem that her maids are against her in this, as signified by their choice of clothing, two servants do stand with her until almost the very end. The first, Ericlea (played by Daveda Karanas), is unlike the majority of the other servants because she is older and is not dressed in a white gown but in a black dress (like her mistress) with a headscarf. For the most part, she acts towards Penelope, as she does with Ulisse, like she is something of a mother figure. The second servant is the shepherd Eumete (played by Robin Leggate), who is also on the figuratively “good” side (that is, with Ulisse and Penelope) in this opera. He remains cheerfully loyal to his master and mistress throughout the entire opera, and appears to have their best interests at heart.

Melanto, some of Penelope’s maids, the suitors, and what seems like the greater part of the other servants emphatically do not. It is interesting to note where and how Monteverdi diverges from Homer, and the love affair of Melanto and Eurimaco is one of the most noticeable differences. For this opera, libretto writer Giacomo Badoaro brought the character of Melantho to the forefront, whereas in the *Odyssey* she was a very minor character (Homer Book XVIII), mentioned only because Odysseus condemned her for her lack of loyalty in becoming

Eurymachus's mistress. Conceivably meant to be representative of the rest of the maids, Melanto, an attractive young woman played by Honduran Melina Pineda (*2007 Spring Season* 37), is wearing a girlish white dress and is obviously deeply in love with the suitor Eurimaco (played by Edmundas Seilius). Eurimaco's character is also much transformed in the opera version from the original Homerian format. In the *Odyssey*, Eurymachus is portrayed as something like the second-worst of the suitors (in terms of destruction and cruelty towards Odysseus as a beggar), Antinous being the worst. Eurymachus is a noisy braggart who throws a stool at Odysseus and is eventually repaid by being murdered second (Books XVIII and XXII). Baodaro and Monteverdi, by contrast, present Eurimaco in a decidedly kinder light. Dressed in peculiar pajama-looking pants and a shirt, Eurimaco seems almost uninterested in winning Penelope's hand, instead concentrating on possibly even having *another* suitor win so that he and Melanto may continue to live happily. He does not even attempt to string Ulisse's bow when the time comes, indicating that he is not a serious contender. Though their love affair is doomed, its forcible conclusion is actually quite tragic to witness; Melanto's grief when she cradles Eurimaco's dead body is heart-rending, which is a major divergence from the almost-celebratory purging of the suitors as presented in the *Odyssey*.

Another major departure from the original epic text comes in the form of the "tragicomic" (Patner Features) character of Iro. As in the *Odyssey*, Irus is a large, portly vagabond who enjoys bullying the beggar Odysseus but attempts to back out of a wrestling match once he sees Odysseus' muscular body (Book XVIII). Monteverdi's opera, however, takes these minor details and expounds until Iro is almost one of the major players. Performed by Robert Burt, in the first four acts Iro is used principally as the comic relief. One of the few overweight characters in the opera, Iro is presented as completely consumed by gluttony. So obsessed is he with food that after he miraculously escapes Ulisse's wholesale slaughter, he decides, in an unnecessarily tragedian but cleverly staged move, to hang himself rather than potentially go hungry.

According to director Diane Paulus, one of the most remarkable things about *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* is how it "depict[s] the whole universe of human existence—from kings and queens to the lowliest beggars and servants. And each character is given a recognizable humanity—including the gods and goddesses" (*2007 Spring Season* 7). The opera is notable for, among many other things, its portrayal of the Olympian deities as very present and involved in the action, even driving it at times. *Chicago Tribune* music critic John von Rhein puts it best: in Monteverdi's "Ulysses," the gods "meddl[e]" (von Rhein 5). There are four gods portrayed in the opera, and all have deliciously elaborate, shimmering costumes to set them apart from the mundane world. Of them all, Minerva, played by the Irish Fiona Murphy, has the most time onstage. In a shiny, flowing silver gown, she was certainly the most physically persuasive deity; she actually touches everyone in the royal family (Ulisse, Penelope, and Telemaco) at some point in the opera. In a sense, it is she who drives almost all of the action and facilitates the ending, even speaking through the characters, especially Penelope. One of the more memorable scenes was the one in which Minerva stands behind Penelope (who cannot sense the goddess) and implants into her the idea of a competition among the suitors to see which can bend Ulisse's mighty bow. Minerva's interactions with the son of Penelope and Ulisse, Telemaco (the "superb, honeyed tenor" (von Rhein 5) Nicholas Phan), particularly the scene in which she carries him to his father, are also very interestingly performed. Giove, king of the gods, is also present much of the time, chiefly soothing tempers and mediating disputes. Portrayed by tenor Jason Collins, Giove certainly had the longest (and therefore most kingly) robe of gold, as well as a crown. Giove only appears on the uppermost platform of the impressive set, which we can take to represent the pinnacle of Mount Olympus, heaven of the gods. His wife, the goddess Giunone, played by Micaëla Oeste, appears only briefly in Act Five to plead for Ulisse, and, as queen of the gods, is bedecked in a very similar manner as her husband.

But of the gods depicted in the opera, by far my most favorite was Nettuno. The god of the sea was played brilliantly by bass-baritone Darren K. Stokes, whose exceptional vocal ability distinguished him from the rest of the cast by its low, reverberating tones, reminiscent of the rolling waves of the sea. Nettuno had the most memorable costume of the entire cast, a series of shining green, gold, and dark blue pieces of material that flowed in waves when he moved. Even this god was shown as being prone to human emotion: he is initially angered enough to appeal to Giove when the Phaeacians ignore his proclamation and return Ulisse to Ithaca, and later, it is only after a long debate with the other gods and goddesses that he agrees to let go of his anger and have mercy on Ulisse. The polar opposite of Giove and Giunone, Nettuno is restricted to the very floor of the stage and even partially below the trapdoor, from which he emerges impressively, in a cloud of fog, at the beginning of his two scenes.

Most memorably in Nettuno's scenes, lighting designer Aaron Black was spot on with how best to present this remaking of Homer's epic. With such an impressive set to work with, which I shall later explore in more detail, the production crew could afford to be more subdued with regard to the lighting, and they certainly were, with a few noteworthy exceptions. Those exceptions included, as I mentioned earlier, the presentation of the sea god Nettuno, upon whose sparkling head shone a deep, green (lime?) light that helped visually illustrate his position as one who dwells in the lower regions of the earth and was suggestive of seaweed or other ocean greenery. This effect was especially effective with the "undulating blue cloth and puffs of dryice fog…represent[ing] Neptune's oceanic realm" (von Rhein 5). The lighting was also important in the very opening scene when Penelope emerges in the spotlight from the dark, and after the bloodbath of the suitors, when the stage is bathed in a red reminiscent, of course, of blood. Overall, though they did an excellent job, I think the lighting designers had room for improvement and could have made even more use of the perfect canvas they had to work with—the set.

The set of *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* has garnered an exorbitant amount of attention in the media with regards to its form, design, and creator. World-renown set designer Rafael Viñoly, a friend of the Chicago Opera Theater with a "keen understanding of space and geometric shapes" (Patner Features), fashioned the unit set, possibly the most breathtaking element of the production. As one review described it, "[Viñoly's] set of multi-level, interconnected white boxes and stairways subtly transforms from an island into a palace and then a mountainside….Folding doors allow for dramatic entrance and exit, and a trap door in the stage functions as Penelope's bath and then a roiling cavern that swallows up a man" ("Review: the Return of Ulysses"). The interior of this minimalist set was blood-red, perhaps, as the *Tribune* article put it, "suggesting the decadence of the court" (von Rhein 5). Whatever else the set's design may imply, it was certainly very picturesque and effective in conjuring a more modernist view of the Greek island of Ithaca, as well as Mount Olympus and the ocean.

In an opera, naturally, one of the most important, if not *the* most important, elements is the music and singing. Conductor Jane Glover, who also plays one of the harpsichords (von Rhein 5) does a fantastic job of making Monteverdi's Italian Baroque sound new and interesting to modern listeners. I am no opera expert, but I definitely enjoyed the musical performances; in *Chicago Sun-Times* writer Andrew Patner's words, the music is "haunting, unfamiliar, yet immediate and completely natural" (Features). With the music helping me understand what was going on, I found it less difficult than I had envisioned trying to keep up with the Italian singing as translated on a screen overhead. The two ominous stringed notes at the beginning of the opera were those of the unique instrument called a theorbo (or *tiorba* in Italian) ("Review: the Return of Ulysses"), a kind of lute with a long, extended neck. Developed in Florence, Italy, during the 1580s (Sayce), about sixty years before *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* (*2007 Spring Season* 7), "the large size of the theorbo and especially the length of its bass strings mean that it has a powerful sound, especially in its bass register" (Sayce), which makes it an ideal return to the musical roots of Monteverdi, a musical choice of which I am sure he would have approved.

Although we may have expected *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* to be from the point of view of the stubbornly faithful Penelope, in the end, it seemed that the titular character of Ulisse was still the protagonist. Played by the immensely talented tenor Marc le Brocq, Ulisse was certainly an interesting character to watch onstage, but his development was, at least in my opinion, never as interesting as Penelope's; her character actually grows and changes, albeit slightly, during the course of the production. According to director Diane Paulus's notes on the opera, a "genius stroke" on Monteverdi and Badoaro's behalf is the way that they held back Penelope's recognition of her husband's true identity until the very end of the opera, thereby creating and sustaining the most extreme of "dramatic tension[s]," which is finally relieved in the last duet of Penelope and Ulisse (*2007 Spring Season* 7). Penelope's final transformation is strikingly illustrated onstage when Ulisse helps her out of the black dress she has been wearing the entire show, revealing a stunningly red dress underneath. It is as if the twenty long years she has spent waiting for her husband have been stripped away and she is fresh and young again, although I must agree with John von Rhein that Lenormand could have made even more of

Penelope's "ultimate awakening from cynical skepticism to rapturous certainty" (5). Despite this slight drawback, as Penelope and Ulisse sing their final duet, the audience is left amazed at how, in a little over three hours, the production has taken them from being miserably separated from each other to this lovely moment of recognition and coming together—the two lovers united, at long, long last.

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