

TALES IN OPERA

Notes on *Simon Boccanegra*, by director **James Conway**.

I was drawn to *Simon Boccanegra* by recordings; like many of you, I have been entranced by the recording (of the 1881 version) from La Scala conducted by Abbado, with Cappuccilli, Freni, Ghiaurov, Carreras and van Dam at the height of their inestimable powers. The feelings of warmth, of regret, of squandered idealism that emanated from the recorded score made me suspect that this was one of Verdi's greatest works; when I finally got to see it on stage I admired it, but felt less. It seemed unspecific, unclear – without the same effect of the composer's more celebrated operas.

Since then I have read with some frustration repeated dismissals of the opera because of its implausible or just too complicated plot. It's unsurprising, I guess; little of any seriousness is written about opera, and even many of those who make a living from it seem satisfied to find it silly, apart from the venerated pages of the score. But at least reading such things impelled me to play closer attention.

Even people who love the music of this opera seem to me to be unfamiliar with the narrative. There are dark corners to it, certainly. At the very outset, why doesn't Simon suspect something has happened to his beloved Maria when her father Fiesco starts bargaining for their love-child? Keen as she is to reveal that she is not a Grimaldi, but a lowly orphan, why does Amelia hide from her jealous lover that Simon is her father?

It strikes me that such dark corners find a natural home in *tales* – the tales we tell of our

lives to make sense of what has happened to us. It strikes me that this majestic opera is like a tale told by an aging, even dying man, whose every valiant effort has failed, whose every glimpse of heavenly light has been defined by its abrupt fading.

Tales give voice to yearning; they are not tidy, or fastidious in chronology or momentary motivation. There are many signals of the kind of narrative Verdi sets in this opera: the little story of the sea-robber Simon (like a swineherd in a fairy tale) who undergoes trials to merit the (princess) Maria; the misty account of the old woman and child (Amelia) in a hovel by the sea, awaiting the kindly mariner (Simon); the locket which identifies father and daughter at first meeting; the potency of the two curses (of the patrician and the plebian), and other words (how neatly Amelia seduces her captor with a little story, and how easily Adorno is corrupted by the toad-like whisperings of Paolo!).

Tales give voice to yearning – yearning in this case for lost feelings, for redemption through the recovery of those feelings (has ever a simple phrase like Boccanegra's 'Figlia' said more, simply and eloquently, about that which has been lost and invites recovery), and yearning to reshape the personal and political worlds of mistrust, sour faith, lonely greed, chilling lovelessness.

Once I felt fine about presenting this old man's story – with its telescoping of time, its fairy tale devices, its ravishing gloom – I knew that we had to set it somewhere real. What I mean by real, in the theatre, is that characters have to move and act in reference to a real time and place, a real set of political relationships.

To be true to the piece, I agreed with



Rehearsals for *Simon Boccanegra*

designer Samal Blak that the set should primarily describe the music, which is the sea-worn state of mind of Simon Boccanegra – but in that poetic space, we informed the characters with the concerns of post war Italy, when the idea of the nation was in crisis, contested and betrayed by left and right. Twenty five years must pass for a child (like an infant princess!) to come to maturity – so we settled on a prologue just post war, when Italian unity was again in question, and the main body of action just as the infamous 'anni

di piombo' ('years of lead') wrapped around political and private life.

I'd like to write a lot about that, but I guess what you see on stage has to stand on its own. You should not spend time locating Aldo Moro, or looking for a resemblance to Berlinguer (though we should all reread that instructive history!). That is not important, finally: all that it gives are roots for performers, so that they stand confident in poetic space, giving voice to this mysterious, passionate tale. **JAMES CONWAY**