

POWER PLAY

JAMES CONWAY

Preparing this production was, for me, exhilarating and discouraging. The exhilaration comes in discovery and rediscovery of the seamless conjunction of noble, succinct text and graceful, seductive music. The discouragement comes in the reflection that opera does not surpass this eloquence and economy.

Rehearsing *Poppea* is rich, and fun: the text and the music, deceptively simple, reveal more on each repetition. There are no superfluous gestures (even among those we have been constrained to omit in performance), no characters without sharp interest. Neither is there sentimentality, nor exaggeration: Busenello, Monteverdi and their collaborators cast a cold eye on character and fate, and serve up real moral tension.

There are many ways to present this tension. I thought the least interesting was assembling Poppea's character traits in the form of a calculating temptress who manipulates Nero (a violent dupe), Ottone (a weak sentimentalist), Ottavia and Seneca (noble victims), with a foil in selfless Drusilla. What we know about Poppea is that she is attractive and sensual, and what we see is that she has a taste for power, and an increasingly strong appetite to be seen and recognized. What's not to like, as they say? If Poppea succeeds by allowing men to project their fantasies onto her, if her charm is in reflecting

positive images onto her admirers, it is those fantasies of power and potency that are more damaging than she, isn't it? She does have a terrible time getting anyone to see who she is — except for her nurse Arnalta, who not only sees everything for what it is, but what it will look like when it withers.

One thing I am sure of is that this is an opera about power — love, yes, but love's power. The heedless child Amor boasts in the Prologue that he will change the world in a day, having stamped on Fortune and Virtue. Each of the characters has an impressive appetite — for holding onto power (Ottavia), for riding with the powerful (Lucano, and in this production Liberto), for having the power of their love recognized (Ottone, Drusilla), for holding onto life (Arnalta, Nutrice). I have conflated some smaller parts into larger roles, each time with an idea of starting with the appetite for power.

Nerone is an astonishing depiction of a man testing his power. He is a sort of artist, a revolutionary, pursuing an appetite to its verge. Around him, people are afraid, inspired, aroused, and afraid again: terror is infertile, but it is not without eroticism, it seems. In Nerone's world it is easy to discover the worst of oneself (Ottone) and of each other, but it is all the more remarkable when someone resists the tyrant — miserably, like Ottavia, scornfully, like Seneca, or nobly, like Drusilla. Drusilla has pluck, integrity and generosity; she is more the foil to Nerone than to Poppea. I have chosen to depict her as a sort of model worker, perhaps the daughter of a general, rather than a wealthy matron. It's as well to remember, though, that she is morally tested just like all the others — and that she is most vivid when she agrees to be accomplice to an assassination.

Komar & Melamid, Stalin in Front of the Mirror, 1982-83. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York / www.feldmangallery.com



Before and after: Stalin's secret police chief, Nikolai Yezhov, was edited out of photographs after falling out of favour and being executed in 1940

Ottone is no less fascinating. Though a man of action, he is defined by notably unsuccessful interactions with powerful women. A true poet in soliloquy, and a moralist at heart, he explores immoral conduct and finds himself wanting. He fails to be very bad, but can no longer think himself good; by the time he offers himself up to Nerone, his shame is overwhelming, and Drusilla has to fight hard to get him to recognize anything decent. Indeed, that scene in which they fight to bear the blame for the bungled assassination of Poppea — by whom he is still enthralled — is the one morally noble scene in the opera which holds its own against the darker pleasures in Nerone's circle.

Could there be a more razor-edged portrayal of pride, of poisonous contempt than Ottavia? Or one more sympathetic? More than a match for Seneca, (whose fall from power is as visceral as that of a Cardinal Wolsey), she seems to enjoy vivisectioning her companion-in-betrayal, Ottone. Seneca himself makes reason impressive, venality almost an oversight; choosing his death, he leaves his less toughened colleagues at a corrupt court shivering in anticipation of worse terror to come, but clinging to contemptible lives.

Character, and characters in spatial relation to each other, and the spatial representation of fate — these seem to me to be the sensible preoccupations of an opera director. The question of what 'period' to set it all in is not the beginning or the end of the process, but an historically informed decision somewhere in the middle, made to facilitate more important matters. Sadly, this is certainly the decision that seems to exercise people most.

I apologise to those who anticipated togas, or 17th century Venice; I thought a while about Tudor Terror, but too much reading about the

revolutionary ego and Stalin's bruising reign convinced me that this was a place in which Nerone might flourish, from which Ottone, Drusilla, Ottavia and Seneca might suddenly disappear, and in which all might live cheek by jowl in a sort of family nightmare, persisting in belief in family (or some related ideal) even as it devours them. Of course, there is no representation of Stalin on stage (sexually, at least, he seems to have been more prude than libertine), just the breath of his world.

It would be a mistake to look for hidden messages about particular historical figures. There is nothing clever or devious here, at least not in execution. The designer and I have fixed on this period and this political stage because it seems apposite to the ethical and political choices with which the characters toy. Do not be overtroubled that Ottavia looks like a Grand Duchess who has changed her spots, Ottone a general in a period when generals fell like ninepins, or Seneca a sort of philosopher Gorki: there are no precise correspondences suggested here, even if our rehearsal room is filled with enough history to let singers know how they might enter a room, or relate to the others on stage, or imagine their desires.

In this opera, the game is power. We see (and feel) both what one might do if one could, without sanction or guilt — and what the effects are of the unreasonable (but compelling) exercise of power on those closest, and on we who sit in darkness in the auditorium. **James Conway**