

Approaching *Rusalka*



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I chose *Rusalka* for this ETO season alongside *La tragédie de Carmen* because it's such a beautiful, sincere work of art, with which we had a chance of making people see and feel something exciting and strong.

At first sight it is an odd choice for production in intimate theatres – one is so used to thinking of *Rusalka* as Wagnerian in narrative and musical scale; that is why Ian Farrington's skilful orchestral arrangement, written for first performance at Iford's handsome cloister, was such a godsend. While the five principle roles remain major undertakings, the transparent textures of the orchestration should allow us to find an expressive range suited to the theatres to which we tour.

In the UK, *Rusalka* has had some formidable interpretations. It would be hard to imagine a better staging of a Freudian approach than Pountney's for ENO, regularly revived since its first production in 1983. Other productions — in technically advanced theatres, without the joy of touring — have been able to adopt an effective fairy-tale palette. For ETO, neither approach seemed right. We had to find a way of telling the story simply and clearly, without the cinematic effects we now associate with fairy tales, or the kind of conceptual interpretation currently derided as heavy handed. Inasmuch as it is based on the Undine myth, best known to us in *The Little Mermaid*, we wanted to make it a recognisable, as flesh-and-blood, as Andersen's terrible and inspiring story.



VEVER FOR ERZULIE

From *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, copyright (c) Estate of Maya Deren. Courtesy of McPherson & Company.

‘Myth is the twilight speech of an old man to a boy... Myth is the facts of the mind made manifest in a fiction of matter.’

MAYA DEREN, *The Divine Horsemen*

We felt that we should tell this story in a real place which at the same time supported the presence of water spirits, the existence of parallel cultures, and a belief in magic.

Reluctant as I am to look on setting as a solution to a perceived dramatic problem, I did, after some time, turn to Haiti in 1915, at the beginning of the American domination there. On that demi-island thrives lively respect for — and interaction with — water spirits, in the form of *Voudoun* (voodoo). *Voudoun* seems to be a development of a number of belief systems coming from various West African kingdoms that supplied the Caribbean and North American slave trade.

Crowded together in distress and ignominy, the enslaved shared neither language nor leadership. Remarkably, within very few years the enslaved of Haiti staged a successful rebellion, and developed a sophisticated and sympathetic world view, synthesizing varied West African beliefs, with some of those of the luckless indigenous people, the Taino (our Jezibaba is a Taino survivor). This world view, *Voudoun*, testifies to the trauma of the sea journey to the 'New World' and the importance of remembering the heritage of a lost world, or a lost people.

*‘Retirer d’en bas de l’eau – one of the major Voudou rituals, being the reclamation of soul of the deceased from the waters of the abyss, the world of *Les Invisibles*.’*

In the cloud forests of Haiti it was reasonable to imagine a community living apart from the colonial society of the plains, or supplying that society with goods and services while remaining fairly innocent of its customs and values. In that particular society the souls of the dead are called from the water and inhabit again the living: the record of the race lives on, flowing forward in the individual. When our *Rusalka* falls in love with the Prince, and decides to leave the world of the cloud forest, she rejects the ancestry that makes her who she is. In a way she interrupts history - so Jezibaba’s curse (that she cannot return if she loses the place that the Prince’s love obtains for her in his colonial society) is less malicious than factual.

Just as reasonable — and horrible — as Jezibaba’s curse is the Prince’s recoiling reaction when he sees *Rusalka* with the Water Spirit. In our production the Water Spirit is a man who carries water from the forest springs - where he is a respected person - to the parched plains – where he is a servant. Seeing then together, the Prince knows *Rusalka* is less a mysterious creature than someone from a class with which he can have no connection.

‘Do you know how it feels when someone else is taking the words from your mouth? That is how Dvořák has taken his melodies from my heart.’

LEOS JANÁČEK

I hope that what is before you is strong and clear, and that it does a kind of justice to the rich, nameless characters and deep feelings of Dvořák and Kvapil’s wonderful opera. I know that I have found it nearly an overwhelming world in which to live during the months of preparation — something that tells me that *Rusalka* is a great, complete work, of terrible honesty, recording the joy and pain of loving.

JAMES CONWAY
General Director